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D GENESIS

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared





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“Petite, et dabitur vobis;”

—— *Matthew vii:7*

Prologue

A Certain Month and Day, 2018 Maisons-Alfort, France

The commune of Maisons-Alfort was located in the southeastern suburbs of Paris. There, David Jean Pierre Garcia stood on the highest level of a five-story building, which had once been a luxury apartment complex. From a window, he overlooked the Marne River.

“Is it true that Ahmed’s daughter had an enchantment cast upon her in Japan?” David asked.

Facing David’s back, the young man who had given the report responded in a flat voice. “At the very least, it’s true that he returned to India with his beautiful daughter.”

“You speak of the young woman in the wheelchair?”

Out of desperation, Ahmed—one of the wealthiest men in India—had brought his daughter Asha to Altum Foraminis. Healing Asha would have been significant for the future of David’s religious organization. However, simply by glancing at the young woman’s condition, David had determined this to be impossible. At the same time, he’d never spoken these words to Ahmed. Religion existed to sell miracles, after all.

In the end, David had postponed Asha’s treatment, inventing various plausible excuses.

The young man continued giving his report. “Apparently, Ahmed ran into an acquaintance during his journey back to India, and he mentioned something about a Japanese sorcerer. Soon, he’ll unveil Asha in high society. When that happens, we’ll know for sure.”

David considered the impact this would have on his order.

Most people knew nothing of Altum Foraminis Sacri Esse, otherwise known as

the Church of the Deep Chasm. Yet those who *did* know of this religious order regarded it as a Christian cult that worshiped the dungeons. In other words, the church viewed the actual bottom of the Earth as sacred—not Vorago, Hades, the Abyss, or Tartarus.

The church's holy woman—Marianne Therese Martin—had gained healing powers from a dungeon, providing the basis for their name. Altum Foraminis differed from the vast array of other cults in that respect.

In short, Marianne was not a charlatan.

Two years ago, David had met her in the Encamp parish of Andorra. Wearing shabby clothes, she'd been sitting on a small bench outside the Saint Mark & Santa Maria Church, which was located in the parish's public cemetery. A group of elderly people from the area had been kneeling all around her.

Curious about this strange group, David had spoken to a man who seemed to be a staff member. "What kind of gathering is this?"

In response, the man glanced at the small assembly. "They are seeking ma santa," he answered in a quiet voice.

"Ma santa?" David asked. "As in the 'sacred hand'?"

As if fleeing something taboo, the man shook his head slightly, turning his back to David and leaving.

Driven by intense curiosity, David sat down on another bench, observing the group from afar. A little while later, hurried movement originated from the gate. A flustered man was carrying a slumped, elderly woman over his shoulders. She was likely the man's wife. This man raced over to the side of the bench.

The woman must have accidentally spilled oil on herself while cooking; her face was red and inflamed. Likewise, terrible burns appeared to cover the entire upper half of her body. If she wasn't taken to the hospital immediately, her life could be in danger. *Why bring her to this place?* David wondered, rage towards these foolish old men and women boiling inside him. Yet in the next moment, surprise replaced all other emotions.

The girl sitting on the bench smiled quietly. As if performing some kind of

spell, she raised her hands towards the injured woman's face. Like a video being rewound, the woman's inflamed features returned to their natural state. Even though she had been on death's door just a moment ago. The man who had brought his wife bowed his head to the ground, looking like he might kiss the girl's feet.

Without thinking, David rose from his seat. Now, he stood frozen, his mouth opened wide enough to dislocate his jaw. Finally, time seemed to resume once more, and he thudded back onto the bench, his entire body drained of strength.

At that moment, David felt something keenly. He had arrived at a decisive crossroads in his life. Divine revelation had struck him.

If one used a dungeon-produced potion, even the miracle of healing became possible. Of course, this girl had no reason to use an expensive potion without remuneration, and David doubted she had actually done so. Regardless, he didn't care if this had been a true miracle or some sleight of hand. The healing had *looked* real, and nothing else mattered.

Humankind had created few products as great as "God." After all, God gave His love for free. Though nothing needed to be procured, the masses still competed to buy this product with a cost rate of zero. Furthermore, humanity had created religion as a system to sell this product. Doctrines and ceremonies were merely performances to sell God's love. Similarly, religious facilities and organizations were akin to specialized stores.

Thus, people of faith paid large sums of money to gain such things as peace of mind. In David's opinion, a man could gain the same contentment by sleeping on the breast of a woman he loved. And in terms of price, neither was any different. Of course, he found the latter more appealing, as one also received the added bonus of physical satisfaction.

That day, David had followed Marianne back to her house and presented a business proposal to her father. To say the least, the man had been absolute scum, selling his daughter to a con man for a pittance.

Marianne was the embodiment of a miracle. The more David learned about her, the more perfect she became. With her first name being Marianne, she seemed the personification of France itself. Moreover, she bore the middle

name of Therese and the last name of Martin. Despite being the most common surname in France, Martin still brought to mind Thérèse of Lisieux—France’s second-most renowned patron saint.

Everything had aligned so perfectly that it had seemed like cheap fiction. Yet with Marianne’s miracles at the center, David had founded a religious organization. Using this church to further himself, he’d brought politicians and wealthy patrons into the fold.

David knew a secret about those who ran nations and large corporations. They tended to be more enthusiastic about mysticism and the occult than most people thought. The histories surrounding Rasputin, the Freemasons, and so forth provided evidence of this. As a result, David and Marianne had been given the perfect opportunity to pluck ripe fruit from the tree.

When Marianne used potions and the like, David would put on a performance to make her “miracles” seem even more excessive. In time, this girl—the embodiment of a small miracle—transformed into a great holy woman. Using teamwork and Marianne’s beauty, they bent the world’s wealthiest echelons to their will.

David turned towards the young man who’d delivered the report. “If that young woman *was* Ahmed’s daughter, she must have used an eighth-ranked or higher potion, correct?”

As of yet, potions ranked eight or higher hadn’t been discovered. If such an item *did* exist, David would have to obtain it at any cost.

“It’s possible, but... According to rumor, Ahmed visited Japan with his daughter to buy a skill orb,” the young man replied.

“A skill orb?”

Based on David’s conversations with Marianne, she’d derived her healing abilities from a skill. However, because she’d lost her D-Card, she didn’t know the name of the skill. Likewise, she didn’t know how she’d obtained it, claiming to have no memories of the incident. Of course, she could have been lying on both accounts.

“A few days ago, a skill orb auction was held in Japan,” the young man

explained.

“That wasn’t a scam?”

“It’s hard to believe, but based on all the information we have, the transaction appears to have actually taken place.”

“Incredible...”

When David had first heard of the auction, he’d assumed it to be the scheme of a genius con artist like himself. Yet when he’d tried to imagine how the con would play out, he’d come up blank. *This must be the work of the world’s greatest master*, he’d thought. But to his great surprise, the auction had been genuine, not fraud.

“What else can you tell me?” David asked.

“One of the orbs up for auction was called Super Recovery.”

“Have its effects been made public?”

“Supposedly, it reduces fatigue and immediately heals minor wounds.”

“Who sold the orb?”

“We don’t know.”

“Then what monster drops the orb?”

“Also unknown.”

Not only did this information sound dubious, but in comparison to the orb’s selling price, its abilities sounded unimpressive. This only made David suspect something of being hidden.

Someone out there can miraculously heal wounds that we’re incapable of treating.

Turning his back on the young man, David looked down upon the Marne River once more, muttering to himself. “The miracle of healing must belong to Altum Foraminis alone.”

Chapter 03: Otherworldly Language Comprehension

November 21, 2018 (Wednesday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

That day, an anticyclone sat imposingly over the Japanese archipelago. Considering it was still November, we would have a cold morning on our hands.

“Kei,” Miyoshi said. “We’re going to have the RV delivered to our house.”

“So, it’s finally coming,” I replied. “How did you end up resolving the exterior problem?”

“I had the manufacturer cover the body with titanium sheets. But once it’s complete, the RV won’t pass inspection.”

“Yeah, I could’ve guessed that. But since we’re not taking it out on public roads, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“When I said that to the manufacturer, he made a weird face, asking if we plan on going to war.” Remembering the conversation, Miyoshi laughed.

“Anyway, I don’t know exactly where the RV is coming from, but someone should be driving it to our front yard.”

“Huh? Didn’t you just say it can’t be driven on public roads?”

“For now, it can. The titanium sheets still haven’t been placed on the front and other vital sections. Once the RV is delivered, the manufacturer will finish the job. Afterwards, no one will be able to drive it ever again.”

Never mind the inspection. If you can’t see out the front window, you can’t drive for shit.

Still, we were only using the RV as a base. Having the windows covered wouldn’t cause any problems.

“We can make do with this for now, but ultimately, I’d like to have a proper dungeon house,” I said. “Do you think someone would make that for us? I don’t

even mind if it's an RV manufacturer."

"Sounds good," Miyoshi answered. "With dungeon conditions being so harsh, I can't imagine an RV lasting too long. If we want something with perfectly airtight sealing and a circulatory system, we might have to hire a space development company."

"I won't demand anything *that* crazy, but camping out in a tent inside a dungeon? Doesn't seem possible for either of us..."

"Yep. We softies totally immersed in modern conveniences wouldn't stand a chance."

"Wait. It's not because we're soft, okay? If two people have to stay on watch, we'd never be able to sleep."

In response to my assertion, Miyoshi snorted. "Well, let's leave it at that."

C'mon, I'm being serious here.

"But when you think about it like that, soldiers sure are incredible," Miyoshi noted.

I couldn't agree more. When raiding dungeons in Japan, the SDF usually employed expedition style, and foreign organizations did the same. Expedition style made for safer explorations, but more importantly, it prevented the likelihood of uncontrollable situations occurring.

In contrast, Team Simon was raiding Yoyogi using adventure style in its purest form. "We're on vacation, after all," Simon had said with a laugh. Though I could imagine them having access to high-tech military equipment, the very basics would be bedding for explorers and guards.

"So, what should we do about weapons and armor?" Miyoshi asked. "Past the second level, not having either of those will look suspicious, right?"

"Yeah, we'll definitely stand out wearing only our casual clothes... If every friendly explorer gives us a word of caution, we'll never stop hearing the end of it."

I imagined each explorer we passed calling out, "These levels are dangerous without armor!" If that happened, I might lose my mind. The person giving

advice out of goodwill only had to hear themselves once. Conversely, the person *receiving* the advice had to hear the same thing countless times.

“Even with expensive armor, we won’t be completely protected,” I said. “Let’s prioritize ease of movement while putting our faith in Super Recovery and VIT. Why don’t we buy the newcomer’s equipment that Mitsurugi and Saito used at first? It’s pretty cheap.”

“As I recall, explorers with a WDA rank of G are only allowed to buy cheap equipment, seeing as we’re at the bottom of the pecking order.”

I nodded at that. “Oh, and I’d like a shield to block enemy projectiles.”

“My titanium frying pan isn’t good enough for you?” Miyoshi huffed.

“Yeah, we might need an upgrade...”

Merely considering their specs, titanium frying pans were a huge bang for your buck. Still, carrying one around would look suspicious as hell, and its small size would barely protect the wielder.

“We won’t be able to buy the kind of shield you’re looking for outside of a dungeon facility’s shop.” Quickly operating her PC, Miyoshi narrowed down the list of serviceable shields. “Oh, this one looks like it can take a beating!”

“Let’s see what we have here.” Peeking at the screen, I found the words “Bunker Shield” displayed there. “Look here, Miyoshi... Who do you think is capable of lugging around this 180 kilogram shield?”

“You, obviously.”

Oh yeah, I probably could. That being said...

“This will draw way more attention than a frying pan!” I cried. “In the complete opposite way!”

“Wow, do you think about anyone but yourself? Anyway, how about these?”

The screen now displayed two different shields: a personal ballistic shield from Protech Tactical, which was used by American SWAT teams, and a mini shield from LBA.

“The personal ballistic shield weighs less than ten kilograms,” Miyoshi said.

“The mini shield is made from Kevlar, and it’s a little more than three kilograms. It has a small protective range, though.”

“For now, I just want to protect myself from surprise attacks, so the mini shield will do fine. Oh, and we’ll need at least two spares.”

“Roger that,” Miyoshi replied, clicking the buy button. “As for weapons... Want to look *super* cool and use one of these from the legendary sword line?”

Laughing, Miyoshi showed me a series of ornately decorated, batch-produced swords.

“The hell are those?” I asked.

“Some game developers collab with weapons manufacturers to make stuff like this.”

“No matter how you slice it, those look like collector’s items. And anyway, I can’t use a sword.”

Since I’d never even held a sword, attacking with one seemed beyond my capabilities. Plus, if you were just going to swing something with brute force, a bat would work just as well.

“If you don’t want to go near the monsters, how about projectiles?” Miyoshi suggested.

“Projectiles, huh?”

Due to some sort of reaction, applying one’s stats to projectile weapons like slingshots and bows had proven difficult. Basically, the projectile would strike with its normal force, not the increased STR of the explorer. This was even more evident with firearms. With a slingshot, you could at least pull back the band yourself. However, simply pulling a trigger gave a person no room to apply their STR.

If you had a nearly impossible-to-draw bow, perhaps your STR would be applied to the arrow. Still, I doubted anyone sold such a weapon, and furthermore, the arrow probably wouldn’t even hit its target. Could DEX assist with aiming, perhaps?

Primarily using magic would be another option, but as MP was a limited

resource, I hesitated to rely on it completely. And in most games, magic-resistant monsters began to appear as the difficulty increased.

“The moon clan lives in a valley-like area on the fourteenth level...” Miyoshi said. “Should we chuck iron balls at them?”

Whoa, this is my chance to become a star pitcher!

“In Hyogo, there’s a company called Funabe Seiko that specializes in manufacturing metal balls,” Miyoshi continued.

“Jeez, you can find anything in Japan.”

“The company makes balls from less than one millimeter to one hundred millimeters in diameter. They use a variety of materials too. There’s an eight-centimeter ball weighing two kilograms and a six-centimeter ball weighing 850 grams.”

“Well then, let’s buy a hundred each of the six-centimeter and eight-centimeter balls,” I said. “I’d like to test out a few different things.”

“If a normal person threw a two-kilogram iron ball with all their might, it would destroy their shoulder.”

“But my stats will prevent that from happening. Also, if we’re throwing things, I’ll want axes too.”

“Like a tomahawk?” Miyoshi asked.

“Yeah, exactly. I’d like something on the heavier side. Can you order around one hundred of Browning’s Shock ‘N’ Awe tomahawks?”

“This is starting to sound like a military order.”

“Do you think they’re going to *axe* our shipment?”

Miyoshi glared at me. “How did I know you’d make that joke?” she asked, confirming the order. “Since there seem to be some in stock, most will arrive tomorrow.”

“Got it. Now, we just have to decide on our route.”

Along the way, we could end up running into monsters whose orbs I’d like to check. If so, I’d want to hunt them.

“Teleportation and Resurrection would be the dream skills, wouldn’t they?” Miyoshi asked.

“Also, anything related to physical strengthening would be convenient.”

“Skills with medical applications probably wouldn’t be used for crimes, and I can see them fetching a tidy sum.”

“Ones related to Recovery, huh...?”

Like Heal, Cure, and Uncurse. Wait, that last one is different.

“A tool that enables communication between the dungeons and the outside world would be convenient too,” I said.

“Apparently there’s a place researching quantum teleportation as a means of communication.”

“Since dungeons probably exist in a different dimension, do you think that’ll be effective?”

“Well,” Miyoshi said, “I’ve also heard of an experiment being set up to confirm quantum entanglement inside the dungeons.”

“Wow. Hope that gets put into practical use soon.”

Despite saying this, I didn’t understand the finer details at all. Only that it sounded awesome.

“But even before then, we might be able to figure out another means of communication,” Miyoshi said. “Through dungeon materials, for instance.”

“What’s your basis for that?”

Miyoshi brought up a map of Yoyogi Dungeon’s floors, tapping the ninth level. “This right here.”

A monster called a colonial worm was displayed there.

“Never heard of it,” I said.

“It’s such a hassle to kill that most people leave it alone.”

A lot of monsters were located away from the route to the next level’s stairs. To hunt these monsters, a person needed some kind of motive, as many of

them were far more trouble than their rewards would suggest. As a rule, many of these were left alone. Like the first-floor slimes, for example.

And colonial worms were prime representatives of “monsters you should just ignore.”

“So, what about it?” I asked.

“Colonial worms are composed of a small colony and a larger, main body.”

The first SDF squadron to encounter the monster had assumed its main body was a nest.

Miyoshi continued her explanation. “The worms that are part of the smaller colonies attack and eat—or rather, swallow—a variety of things, but they don’t change in size.”

“So they never end up looking like a tsuchinoko?”

“Nope. But when the SDF defeated the main body, they sliced it with a blade. Before it transformed into light, objects that the colony had presumably swallowed poured out of the main body.”

After being defeated, dungeon monsters disappeared. Thus, no one could perform a completely satisfactory investigation of the colonial worm. Yet strangely enough, when the main body had been sliced in half, the contents had spilled out before the creature’s death.

“Apparently, objects not originating from the dungeon were left there intact,” Miyoshi concluded.

“Sounds like a treasure chest.”

“And so, the colonies and the main body are thought to be somehow connected on the inside.”

“How fantastical,” I said. “Basically, they share something like a stomach?”

“Exactly. And in that case, wouldn’t the main stomach and the colony’s organs somehow share the same physical space?”

“It’s possible, but... You can’t obtain items by capturing a monster and dissecting it. They’re dropped, not extracted.”

“I agree. Plus...”

Miyoshi proceeded to show me an extremely grotesque video. Put bluntly, it scared the living crap out of me. The colonies crawled along the walls of a corridor, completely covering them. Honestly, the video reminded me of the house’s interior in the final scene of *Squirm*.

“Gross...” I mumbled.

“That’s why nobody goes in this direction.”

“No kidding. Unless you have powerful, ranged magic, who would go near that thing?”

“Definitely not me,” Miyoshi said. “I’m in no rush to get eaten.”

That would be a poor punch line indeed.

“But if we just need magical skills, there are quite a few candidates,” Miyoshi said, pointing to a series of monsters: the lesser salamandra on level eleven, the kamaitachi on level seventeen, and the great desmana on levels thirteen and fourteen.

“What’s a desmana?” I asked.

“Apparently, it resembles a large mole called a Russian desman. It’s known for having a thick tail and pointed nose.”

Even without a tail, the great desmana would be a full meter in length. Indeed, it looked like a rat or a mole.

“That sort of thing is just wandering around?” I asked. “Can’t see my tomahawks being much use against them.”

“Carrying another weapon with a longer blade might be a good idea.”

A longer blade, huh? It all comes back to swords, doesn’t it?

“Speaking of which,” Miyoshi said. “I was thinking of dropping a bus in and out of Storage.”

“What?” I asked.

“Whenever I take something out of Storage, I can—to some extent—decide the direction and placement, remember?”

“Oh, right.”

“Do you think I could drop something incredibly sharp and pointed on top of our enemies’ heads? It probably won’t work on really fast monsters, though.”

“A mass weapon, eh...?” I mused. “It’s worth thinking about.”

“And what if we could maintain the placement of magic even after it’s been fired? If we kept aiming water balls at the enemy’s head, we could suffocate it, right?”

“Do monsters even breathe oxygen?”

“No idea,” Miyoshi said. “But imagine the Dungeon Passage Theory is correct, and the deepest dungeons serve as links to another world. There could be a difference in atmospheric pressure and the balance of gasses making up the atmosphere, right? But in the past three years, no problems related to those differences have popped up.”

“Isn’t that because each floor is a different pocket dimension?”

Electric signals didn’t reach inside or outside of dungeons, and a similar phenomenon occurred between individual floors. Moreover, the massive size of dungeons didn’t correspond with the actual amount of space they occupied underground. If dungeons weren’t separate spaces—like pocket dimensions—I couldn’t think of any other explanation.

“Even if that’s the case, you can seamlessly pass between dungeon floors as if they’re connected,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“In that case, maybe the air moves as well. If so, the other world might have the same atmospheric pressure and composition as Earth. And that would mean dungeon life-forms breathe air, right?”

“Of course, the floors could be disconnected, and we move between them through something like teleportation, but... Don’t you find all this strange, Kei?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Dungeons are connection points to another world in which monsters presumably roam free. And a lot of people have invaded those dungeons. Shouldn’t we be more wary of unknown pathogens? Why are there no

quarantines or disinfections?”

True enough. Even on Earth, quarantines were sometimes mandatory when traveling between different countries. Yet to my knowledge, dungeon explorers never had to undergo extended isolation. Supposedly, until the dungeons had been opened to the public, no dangerous bacteria or life-forms—aside from monsters—had been discovered within their depths.

“Perhaps oxygen kills otherworldly bacteria,” Miyoshi said.

“No matter how hard we rack our brains, we won’t come to any conclusion here. In any case, the mass weapon is a good idea. Think you can procure a one-ton stake?”

But if the object grew too heavy, Vault wouldn’t be able to hold it.

In response to my suggestion, Miyoshi continued speculating. “If I’m going to use a sharp weapon, something around one hundred kilograms would be most convenient. And if dungeon floors have unlimited height, the most interesting thing on the market would be rebar around five centimeters thick.” At this, Miyoshi chuckled. “But of course, this wouldn’t work within any inclosed spaces.”

Rebar, huh? Come to think of it, that falling rebar marked the beginning of this strange fate. What in the world did I hit down there?

“If you could accelerate your weapons, that would be pretty convenient too,” I said.

“Oh, I might be able to do that. I’ll have to practice later. Still, we’ll need to custom order the casting of anything over a ton. I’ll make a 3D blueprint and get an estimate, but unfortunately, it won’t be ready for our upcoming exploration.”

You might be able to accelerate your weapons?!

If so, I would have to practice with something like ping pong balls. If acceleration proved possible, perhaps I would need to increase my INT and DEX rather than STR. I’d look into all of that later.

“If you don’t mind doing all that, I’d appreciate it,” I said.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

“Oh, is the RV here?” Miyoshi asked.

Checking the computer screen, Miyoshi opened the gate. Afterwards, a vehicle entered the front driveway of our house.

The RV turned out to be quite large. When I went inside, I muttered involuntarily, “Miyoshi, this is way too elaborate...”

Though the vehicle’s base was a twenty-five-foot Dolly Varden, the windows had all been covered to prevent light from seeping through. Screens hung in the dinette and the bedroom in the back, displaying images from the security cameras installed on the outside.

“From what I’ve heard, there’s not much noise in the dungeons, so fuel cells are supplying all the electricity,” Miyoshi explained. “I paid out the wazoo for them!”

For some reason, Miyoshi seemed happy about that. I supposed she enjoyed using new technologies.

“I’m using PEFCs⁽¹⁾ and DMFCs⁽²⁾ concurrently,” she continued. “I’m bringing a lot of them just in case, but the fans are so loud, I had to work out a solution.”

Yeah, I can barely hear anything.

In any case, I’d placed all the food in Vault. Since we’d barely need to cook anything, the kitchen section had been extensively simplified.

While Miyoshi explained various things, a rather pointless thought crossed my mind. Seeing as this RV had an American-style interior, why was it called a Dolly Varden? Wasn’t she a Dickens character? Well, Old American and English decors might have been similar.

Regardless, with the RV’s delivery, most of our preparations had come to an end. If everything else we’d ordered arrived tomorrow, we’d be able to start dungeon diving. Thinking about my first real adventure, I felt a little excited.

November 22, 2018 (Thursday)

Yoyogi-Dungeon

“You ready, Miyoshi?” I asked.

“I’m good to go. Speaking of which, you’ve brought all the food, right?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve packed us plenty to eat. Well then, shall we go?”

“Sounds good.”

This was my first time wearing proper gear. It was still beginner’s equipment, but somehow, my body felt firmer than usual. Feeling relatively motivated, we descended into Yoyogi Dungeon’s underground. Since being empty-handed would make us stand out, we carried LBA mini shields with Browning tomahawks hanging from our waists.

Unlike during my usual dives, we joined the flow of people and headed towards the stairs to the second level. Our most important destination was the fourteenth level, where the moon clan resided. Still, measuring the experience points—or SP—granted by monsters on various floors would be important work as well. Together, Miyoshi and I had studied the unpopulated areas and environments of various levels.

From what I’d heard, both the action camera and the depth sensor installed within our helmets were in constant operation. The depth sensor automatically rendered a 3D map of the dungeon. Apparently, this map was the original version of the JDA’s Dungeon View. Since our helmets were mapping places that had already been traversed, including the Dungeon View seemed only natural.

Miyoshi had bought a mountain of batteries since—according to her—the value of information was immeasurable. Sure, she might have been correct, but without Vault and Storage, continuously powering our electronics would have been impossible. Most people would have called the very notion absurd. But on that front, we had nothing to worry about.

“Are you two novice divers?” someone asked us.

“Oh, uh, yes,” I replied.

The person asking the question belonged to a party of three men. In all likelihood, he'd made this assumption based on our gear.

If this were a VRMMO or an otherworld light novel, I would have feared getting robbed here, but that sort of incident rarely happened in Yoyogi. After all, Japanese people weren't disposed towards violence. Plus, the JDA had access to the personal information of all dungeon divers, making anonymous crimes difficult to commit. In our modern society, the risk of assaulting someone to gain something far outweighed the reward.

On our way to the second level, the man—who introduced himself as Yoshida—told us about the various hunting grounds for newcomers.

"Also," he said, "with that armor, I wouldn't recommend going any deeper than the fifth level."

From the fifth floor onward, boar type monsters suddenly appeared, and according to Yoshida, newcomer equipment couldn't withstand their charges.

Essentially, the fifth level separated the pros from the amateurs. In Yoyogi, monsters on the first to fourth levels didn't drop "common items." When defeating certain kinds of monsters, an explorer could obtain these common items at a high rate. In short, if you wanted to make a living in Yoyogi, you had to descend to the fifth level.

However, the separation of pros from amateurs did result in something positive. Put simply, conflicts could come up due to explorers having different attitudes towards diving. This clear distinction prevented that from occurring.

"Understood," I said. "I appreciate the advice."

As I gave my thanks on the spiral staircase leading to the second level, Miyoshi and I parted ways with Yoshida's party. Afterwards, we stepped out onto the second level for the first time.

"Even though I knew about this, it's still a strange sight," Miyoshi said.

Isn't it nice having a sky in a dungeon?

My thought brought to mind a saying from Taro Okamoto. In an old commercial advertising his line of drinking glasses, he'd famously said, "Isn't it

nice having a face on the bottom of a glass?” Of course, he’d also said, “Art is an explosion!” Hopefully, nothing would blow up in this dungeon.

Based on the sky overhead, I couldn’t believe we were in a dungeon. There were also rolling hills, grassy plains, and even forests. Apparently, this setting continued until the ninth floor.

Turning around, I looked at the entrance to the stairs, finding an opening on a slightly steep hillside. When I peered inside, I couldn’t see the top of the gently curving staircase. Logically speaking, it should have pierced through the top of the hill, yet no spiraling steps climbed into the sky.

“Yeah, it’s certainly strange,” I replied.

Regaining my composure, I looked forward. The main inhabitants of Yoyogi’s second level were the standard humanoid monsters—goblins and kobolds, for instance—and bestial creatures such as wolves.

“Anyway, let’s check out the goblins and kobolds first,” I said.

Checking the map Miyoshi and I had made together, we headed towards an unpopulated area. It was located in the opposite direction of the stairs leading to the third level. Though not quite as accessible as the first floor, the stairs leading downwards were still relatively close to the entrance. Thus, hardly anyone traveled in the opposite direction. And of course, the deeper you went, the fewer people you came across.

Upon arriving in a completely empty area, I changed my stats back to full power and took off running.

“W-Whoa!” I cried.

“Kei, where are you going?! Wait for me!”

My body felt as light as a feather, and I could move at incredible speeds. Yet at the same time, I could control my body easily, with my perception of time seeming to stretch out.

“Man, statuses are amazing,” I muttered to myself.

As of yet, no traps had been identified within any of Yoyogi Dungeon’s explored areas. In fact, no one had ever found a trap inside any dungeon across

the world. Though no one knew the reason, this aspect seemed to diverge slightly from fiction. Of course, if there *were* traps, that would lead to an even greater mystery. Who would lay them in the first place?

Imagine investigating a normal manor house. If you pressed a button behind a painting, would that truly cause a wall to open in another room, revealing a stash of bullets? If that sort of contraption actually existed, the creator would have to be insane.

And so, depending on the landscape of an environmental section, you could move through dungeons rather quickly without any problem. Still, moving too quickly might increase your chances of turning a corner, bumping into a monster, and falling in love. But only to some extent.

Of course, Miyoshi wasn't able to keep up with me.

"Kei," she said. "If you're going to run that fast, at least carry me."

Yeah, unless it's an emergency, I'm not gonna do that. Guess I'll walk normally.

After continuing for a few minutes, we found a small, humanoid figure at the end of a straight passageway.

"Is that our first goblin?" I asked, coming to a halt.

"Seems like it. Let's check its XP first."

"Good plan."

Opening up Making, I withdrew an iron ball from Vault. Unfortunately, I couldn't accelerate objects when taking them out of Vault. Seeing as Miyoshi *could* accelerate objects, perhaps this feature only belonged to Storage. Because time stopped within Vault, accelerating an object inside its confines while simultaneously withdrawing it might have been impossible. Of course, this could have just been a difference in our abilities. If that were the case, I might have to shed a few tears.

Regardless, I took out one of the six-centimeter balls, lobbing it at the goblin. As soon as the ball left my hand, the creature's head disappeared with a bang.

"Uh, what now?" I asked.

“Wow!” Miyoshi cried.

For one moment, I stood there dumbfounded. I’d just witnessed the power of raising all my statuses to an even hundred. Come to think of it, I had higher stats than Team Simon, who had cleared the thirty-first floor of Evans Dungeon. At least, I probably did.

In any case, goblins gave out 0.03 XP. A little more than their slime counterparts.

I used Water Lance—one of Water Magic’s functions—on the next goblin we encountered. We had a limited supply of iron balls, and retrieving them in a forest area would be a hassle.

Among magic-based skill orbs, some contained Roman numerals. These “numbered orbs” allowed the user to wield a corresponding level of magic from the very beginning. On the other hand, the user couldn’t learn any other types of magic from that particular orb.

Through experience and training, an unnumbered orb user could acquire magic equivalent to that of a numbered orb. They could even learn original magic, but mastery of these functions could prove difficult.

Incidentally, all orbs coming from slimes had been unnumbered.

By researching already known numbered magic, Miyoshi and I had been able to learn two spells: “create water” and “water lance.” In its initial state, Water Magic required one MP to create a single lance. Though its effects weren’t as drastic as the iron balls, one lance could still obliterate a goblin.

“Nice and easy, huh?” I said.

Afterwards, I continued using water lances to my heart’s content. Unlike Fire Magic, Water Magic had no chance of harming the forest.

In light novels, the longer someone uses a certain kind of magic, the stronger it becomes. Yet in games, the spell’s strength would change very little with continual use. I couldn’t help but wonder which pattern reality would follow.

With my statuses maxed out, my MP was 190. Based on my observations via

Making, I recovered the same amount of MP as my INT every hour. Of course, I didn't know if this was normal or a side effect of Super Recovery. Miyoshi would probably work out the finer details.

All the while, I continued recording numbers. As expected, the second goblin yielded 0.015 XP.

Just as our previous research had suggested, goblins lived in groups. And with this being an unpopulated area, hardly anyone ever thinned out their numbers either. In two hours, I killed nearly one hundred of them. Along the way, I also defeated a handful of wolves with water lance, striking them down instantaneously.

Never underestimate an INT value of one hundred.

The first wolf had yielded 0.03 experience points. Same as the goblins. Yet at this point, the goblins were only giving out 0.003 points. Based on the handful of wolves I'd also defeated, the decrease in XP was calculated separately for different species.

After defeating my ninety-first goblin, something unexpected happened.

"Huh?" I mumbled.

"What's wrong?" Miyoshi asked.

Skill Orb: DEX×HP+1 | 1 / 5,000,000

Skill Orb: Premature Birth | 1 / 10,000,000

Skill Orb: Premature Growth | 1 / 800,000,000

Skill Orb: Accelerated Growth | 1 / 1,200,000,000

Skill Orb: Premature Death | 1 / 2,000,000,000

Before this dungeon dive, I'd made sure to keep the last two digits of my total monsters killed at 00. Yet along with the ninety-one goblins, I'd also defeated nine wolves.

"So," I said, "this function activates when I kill one hundred monsters *in total*,

not one hundred of the same species.”

This would be very important. After all, I wouldn’t have to slay one hundred moon clan shamans. Definitely good news.

“Wow!” Miyoshi cried. Her eyes turned into yen signs, and she performed a little dance from *Swan Lake*. “If you’re always careful to adjust the numbers, we could even stockpile boss-level orbs!”

That might be true, but first, I’d have to defeat a boss. That aside, this is an insane lineup of orbs. What the hell is Premature Death?! I don’t even want to imagine what would happen if an elderly person used this!

Without further ado, I read the list aloud to Miyoshi.

“Accelerated Growth and Premature Death are unregistered skills,” she said.

Apparently, she’d downloaded the skill database onto her tablet. In any case, most explorers had defeated a goblin. If one hundred million people had D-Cards, and each one of them slew twelve goblins, at least one person should have obtained Accelerated Growth. However...

“Plenty of people have only killed one monster to obtain a D-Card,” Miyoshi said. “And afterwards, a lot of explorers start hunting bigger prey than goblins. They don’t have any materials worth selling, after all.”

“I suppose so.”

I didn’t want to keep hunting goblins forever either. They yielded about the same amount of XP as slimes, and until now, I’d never heard of them dropping anything.

“Apparently, explorers hunt goblins for the items they gather in their nests,” Miyoshi explained. “Not for any drops.”

“Why didn’t you say so sooner?”

Up until now, we’d seen quite a few places resembling nests, but we hadn’t searched any of them.

“Unlike drop items, you can’t find them without looking,” Miyoshi said. “And by the way, these stashes are called GTBs.”

“Whoa, does that stand for Goblin Treasure Boxes? I’d never even heard of them. You should’ve told me sooner.”

“Despite how much time the search takes, you won’t come across anything too spectacular. The best you can hope to find is a first-ranked potion. I thought it best to continue our journey at a brisk pace.”

“Still, sounds like a decent treasure hunt,” I said.

“It’s for amateurs.”

Would hunting for treasure chests make a good date?

“I wouldn’t recommend walking around and killing goblins on a date,” Miyoshi warned. “Most women would run screaming in the opposite direction.”

“Are you a mind reader?!”

“Nope, but whenever you think about women, your nostrils flare.”

“Seriously?!”

“Do you *really* want to know?” Miyoshi asked, dodging the question.

Yeah, if that’s true, I’m in big trouble.

DEX×HP+1 was one of the so-called “dud orbs.” However, based on a previous conversation with Miyoshi, those would be important in the future. Plus, it had a drop rate of one in five million. Explorers across the world had probably found quite a few of these.

“Premature Birth shortens pregnancy,” Miyoshi continued. “Due to its crazy name, it was first used on a pig.”

If something other than a human defeated a monster, a D-Card still appeared. Even so, the cards of most wild animals wound up lost. And perhaps because most animals had no name, their cards didn’t display a name or rank. I couldn’t help but wonder what would happen if someone’s pet acquired a D-Card. Even if it became a top-ranked explorer, how would you know it was an animal without seeing it?

Of course, animals in possession of D-Cards also became capable of using orbs. I could only guess how most animals acquired their skills, but in the case

of pigs, they had been fed the orbs.

At any rate, after getting pregnant, the sow in possession of Premature Birth had delivered her litter in a mere twelve days. This skill had shortened the gestation period to one tenth of its normal time. Nevertheless, the mother had been severely weakened, having used ten times the normal amount of energy in twelve days. At present, these pigs were being used to investigate the hereditary nature of skills in animals.

“So far, only two Premature Growths have been found,” Miyoshi said. “Supposedly, it rapidly accelerates a person or animal’s growth within a dungeon...”

“Based solely on its name, that skill sounds like it would reach its limit pretty fast.”

At ten, you would be a prodigy. At fifteen, you would be gifted. Past twenty, you would just be a normal person.

“Still, most humans wouldn’t want to use any of these orbs,” I said.

In the end, DEX×HP+1 seemed like the only safe-to-use skill on the list.

“Well, might as well claim the rarities for now,” I said. “That being said, I don’t know about Premature Death... What is this, an assassination item?”

I couldn’t conceive of Premature Death—having an acquisition rate of one in two billion—as being anything other than a life-shortening skill. If we extrapolated from Premature Birth, would Premature Death shorten your lifespan by one tenth? If so, I couldn’t see any points in its favor. Even as an assassination tool, it would take too long. Perhaps the skill had corresponding benefits, like turning the user into a genius. Even so, I had no way of testing this, and I certainly wouldn’t use the orb myself.

“I’ll go with Accelerated Growth for now,” I concluded.

Thus, I obtained another new orb.

Since the goblins seemed inexhaustible, and I recovered one hundred MP every hour, we continued hunting for another two hours. Miyoshi—who had collected plenty of data—also used smaller bursts of water lance to slay our

enemies. She could kill the goblins in one blow with the accelerated iron balls, but unfortunately, those were a limited resource.

“Using the iron balls feels so much more pleasant,” she complained.

What a terrifying thing to say.

Finding a kobold, I defeated it as my next hundredth monster.

Skill Orb: AGI×HP+1 | 1 / 20,000,000

Skill Orb: AGI+1 | 1 / 50,000,000

Skill Orb: Life Detection | 1 / 1,200,000,000

Skill Orb: Exchange Alchemy | 1 / 16,000,000,000

“Everything has been discovered except for Exchange Alchemy,” Miyoshi said.

Three out of four of these orbs had been discovered. Life Detection might have been rare on the upper floors, but apparently, high-ranked species of wolf monsters dropped them with relative frequency.

“Since the word ‘cobalt’ originates from kobold, alchemy does make sense, but...what does ‘exchange’ mean in this case?” Miyoshi asked.

“Perhaps the skill demands some kind of equivalent exchange. Sounds exactly like a fable.”

One in sixteen billion is certainly rare, but still...

“The orbs originating from goblins and kobolds just radiate malice, don’t they?” I asked.

“Well, they’re mischief-loving sprites, aren’t they?”

These orbs were too dangerous to sell, and I wouldn’t test them on myself. I had no choice but to come back after obtaining a skill like Appraisal. Without saying a word, I acquired the Life Detection orb.

“Anyway, we’ve figured out what orbs we can acquire from these monsters,” I said. “Shall we head onwards?”

“I suppose so,” Miyoshi answered. “We’ll continue to find wolves on the lower levels. In Yoyogi’s second through fourth levels, the enemies only grow a little stronger, with their rate of appearance changing somewhat. But for the most part, their species remain identical. For now, let’s head to the fifth floor.”

“All right, let’s go.”

“Wait. Since no one’s around, let’s eat here first. I’m starving.”

“Sounds good. So, are you bringing out our secret weapon?”

Miyoshi cackled. “The time has come to debut our mobile base—Lady Dolly!”

Finding a wide enough area, Miyoshi removed the RV from Storage. Climbing aboard the vehicle, I took out bento boxes and side dishes purchased at the food court of the department store. We then proceeded to have lunch.

After lunch and resting for a short while, we headed straight towards the fifth level. Seeing as we could visit these near-surface levels at any time, we had no reason to thoroughly investigate them right now. In areas devoid of other explorers, we used water lances to defeat our enemies. When others were around, we used the iron balls to make quick work of the monsters. Using these two methods, we raced along the shortest route to our destination.

Upon entering the fifth level, we came to the belated realization that we would draw more attention than expected. From the fifth level onwards, orcs and boar type monsters began to appear. As a result, explorers dressed entirely in newcomer’s equipment never braved this area.

“Kei,” Miyoshi said. “We won’t be able to hide in plain sight around here.”

“Yeah, I should’ve brought cloaks to hide our equipment.”

The fifth through eighth levels were forested. Yes, there were wooded areas on the second through fourth levels, but these forests were much denser. Likewise, caverns dotted the area, which humanoid monsters used as bases.

“Orcs, wild boars, and forest wolves begin appearing on this level,” Miyoshi explained while examining her tablet. “And at night, church grims and night wolves will also come out of hiding.”

Apparently, teams aiming for the deeper floors often spent the night on the eighth level. Many undead monsters inhabited the tenth level, and the stairs to the eleventh level were quite distant. As the eleventh level was a lava floor, it wasn't the ideal camping environment. Plus, most normal explorers couldn't travel farther than the eleventh level in one day.

Finally, by staying on the ninth level, you risked unexpected attacks from ogres and colonial worms. As such, the eighth level's exit had been selected through a process of elimination. In these past three years, mechanical equipment brought by expedition style teams had accumulated there. Over time, something akin to a temporary base had been erected in the area.

In any case, it was almost sunset. At this time, returning or pressing onwards would prove difficult. Around the stairs, a handful of teams had begun preparing to spend the night here. On this level, the groups waiting for nightfall sought to locate church grims. These were black, doglike monsters that appeared only at night on the fifth through ninth levels.

At first, the church grim had been confused with the hellhound. Oddly enough, this monster frequently dropped a red liquid now called an "assimilation drug," which looked identical to a potion. Even if you touched this liquid, it only displayed the word "potion." Even so, this liquid didn't heal wounds, and due to its unknown effects, explorers had initially derided the substance as a fake healing potion.

Ultimately, its effects had been discovered by sheer coincidence.

The tenth level of Yoyogi Dungeon was a sprawling graveyard occupied by undead monsters. The undead were difficult enemies, and in the beginning, no explorers had been able to find the eleventh-level stairs. During that time, a zombie had bitten a certain team member's arm. Panicked, this explorer had used one of the "fake" healing potions to mend his wound. Of course, this hadn't worked, but realizing his mistake, the explorer had quickly used an actual potion. As a result, he was unharmed, but the true discovery had come to light afterwards.

Low-level undead—zombies and skeletons, for instance—had ignored this explorer, treating him as one of their comrades. Ever since, the black dog once

thought to be a hellhound had become known as the church grim. In other words, a grave keeper. And thanks to the assimilation drug, the hellish tenth floor had been transformed into a mere passageway. After all, explorers could now pass through the graveyard unscathed.

Unfortunately, the drug's effects weakened at night. Because of this, even high-level explorers avoided the tenth level after sunset, considering the area to be more trouble than it was worth.

Come nightfall, explorers heading to the eleventh level and beyond would hunt church grims on the fifth through eighth levels. Of course, the fifth level entrance proved the safest, while the eighth level exit was most suited for hunting. Thus, most people hunted in one of these two places.

Escaping from the explorers making camp around the stairs, Miyoshi and I surreptitiously headed towards an empty area. After a short distance, we came upon a creek about four meters wide. Since the water wasn't too deep, I picked up Miyoshi, jumping to the other side.

"Kei," she said. "I noticed this on the second level too, but your increased stats aren't too shabby."

"True. Under normal circumstances, you might feel heavy, but now—*OUCH!*"

From behind, Miyoshi struck me in the liver with a right hook. "The pheasant would not be punched in the gut if not for its cries," Miyoshi muttered, butchering an old proverb.

It's supposed to be "shot," not punched in the gut.

Where I squatted down, an open area—perfect for our purposes—spread out before us. Once she'd confirmed our solitude, Miyoshi withdrew the mobile base from Storage.

"I'm exhausted," Miyoshi said with a sigh.

She entered the vehicle and turned on the power for the surveillance equipment. Since we'd completely covered Dolly's exterior in titanium plates, we couldn't see the outside from within. To compensate for this, we'd installed surveillance cameras in various places. After checking our surroundings on the monitors, Miyoshi then hurried into the restroom to take a shower.

While drinking tea I'd withdrawn from Vault, I watched the monitors with half an eye. Some time later, I heard a rattling sound, and Miyoshi exited the shower room.

"You can use the shower now," she said. "Oh, and if you could, whip up something for me to eat from Vault!"

"No problem."

I lined up drinks, sweets, and several bento boxes on top of the table. Afterwards, I headed towards the shower room. Yet midway there, I came to a halt.

"Was that a scream?" I asked.

Jumping in front of the console, Miyoshi turned up the sensitivity on the sound-concentrating microphone. Just as a small flash shone on the surveillance camera, I heard the same voice again.

"Yeah, that sounded like an animal howl and a human scream," Miyoshi said. "What will you do, Kei?"

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing," I replied.

"I'll do my best to guide you from here," Miyoshi said with a sigh, tossing me a pair of earphones. "Wear those, if you would."

"You got it."

Leaving the base, I started running, following Miyoshi's directions all the while. After crossing the river and traveling a short distance, a thick fog suddenly appeared. "Beyond here is an entirely different world," the unnatural mist seemed to be telling me.

"Miyoshi, can you see the fog?" I asked.

"I can, but it's more like darkness than fog. It's pitch-black. I'll fly a drone inside... It'll be impossible to see otherwise."

She even loaded drones onto the RV?

Finding my resolve, I stepped into the mist. The intermittent, bestial howls,

the repeated screams of a woman, and someone's threatening cries grew increasingly louder.

"What the hell are these things?! 'Cause they're definitely *not* church grims!"

Gripping a two-and-a-half-meter polearm, the man swung his weapon wide, forcing his opponent to back away. Despite its enormous body, the wolf monster's black fur melted into the darkness. Only the creature's red eyes and bared fangs exposed its location.

"I don't know!" a man with a large build cried out. "Usually, church grims are supposed to appear alone, but this one... Damn it!"

As the black monsters continued attacking as a pack, he struck them with a two-handed sword.

"I-I've heard that hellhounds hunt in packs..." the polearm wielder stammered.

Behind this pair, another man with a small build had sustained heavy injuries and lost consciousness. While staunching his bleeding, a woman had been screaming all the while. Now, she'd regained a modicum of composure.

"Aren't those monsters supposed to appear on the eighth level?!" she cried. "Still, if these really are hellhounds... Is there a barghest nearby?!"

"N-Now that you mention it, this black fog that appeared out of nowhere..."

The two men who had been fighting exchanged glances.

"Hey, Mishiro," the first man said to the woman. "Leave Shota behind."

"Huh?" she asked, completely dumbfounded. "What on earth are you...?"

"If that thing really is a barghest, it'll have nine hellhounds as backup. We can't defeat that many of them. I'm not even sure if we can escape."

"You see what we're getting at, right...?" the second man asked.

Seeming to enjoy the humans' conflict, the hellhounds remained at a distance, refraining from attacking. With their mouths split into red grins, the darkness itself seemed to be laughing at them.

“Th-That’s absurd!” Mishiro shouted. “You want me to abandon my little brother and run away?!”

“If you want to die together, be my guest!”

With that, the two men fled.

Mishiro fell to her knees, continuing to shout. “No, wait! Please don’t leave me!”

The men didn’t turn around, and from behind her, she could hear multiple low growls. Biting her lip in frustration, she nocked an arrow to her compound bow, gripping the triggerless releaser in her right hand. Spinning around, she fired the arrow into the eye of an attacking hellhound. Though the monster’s whine gave her some satisfaction, the three remaining hellhounds were attacking simultaneously. Their fangs would reach her body in a few seconds.

Giving up, Mishiro closed her eyes. Yet in the next moment, a squelching sound reached her ears, the pain never assaulting her. Opening her eyes fearfully, she found the back of a man—dressed entirely in beginner’s equipment—standing before her.

“Can you walk?” he asked without turning towards her.

Why did trouble pursue me so relentlessly? With my LUC being so high, I wanted to yell at this particular status to start doing its job.

“Can you walk?” I asked the woman.

In response, she looked at the unconscious man at her side. He’d sustained a serious wound on his arm.

“Once you’ve woken him up, you’ll find a creek over there,” I said, pointing in the direction I’d come from. “Keep running until you cross it.”

According to myth, barghests couldn’t cross flowing water. Up until now, the design of these dungeons had shown deference to Earth’s culture. In that case, this restriction would hold true.

“What about you?” the woman asked.

“Well, I need to stay here and take care of these mutts.”

“I can help fi—”

“You’ll only get in the way.”

For one moment, the woman looked deflated, but upon seeing the headless hellhounds scattered around the area, she nodded. Well, at least she seemed to be the decisive, clever sort. That being said, why hadn’t these monster corpses disappeared?

The woman grabbed something from her pocket, making the fallen man smell it. Groaning, the man appeared to regain consciousness. Afterwards, she spoke something to him, and with a nod, he rose to his feet, still groaning. At least his legs seemed to work.

“Go,” I said, pointing towards the creek.

Dragging their feet, the man and woman began running in that direction. Though four hellhounds attempted to chase after the pair, their fangs never reached their prey, my water lances finishing them off. That Water Magic still worked on enemies of this level came as a huge relief. Feeling calm and collected, I relayed the numbers to Miyoshi.

“You don’t seem the least bit worried,” she said through my earphones.

“Well, my magic *did* work, after all.”

“I’m scouting from above with the drone, and there appears to be something large ahead of you.”

“It’s probably a barghest. I can hear the sound of chains being dragged.”

With the hellhounds defeated, the sound of dragging chains grew louder. From the darkness directly in front of me, I could also hear the ominous rumbling of a bestial growl. At the same time, nine magic circles appeared on the ground, with newly summoned hellhounds appearing on top of them.

“Oh?” I said. “Could this be my lucky day?”

“What do you mean?” Miyoshi asked.

At the sight of these resummoned hellhounds, I must have been possessed by

the Queen of the Merchant's greed. From what I'd read, the monster summoning these hellhounds must have been some kind of barghest. And judging from its continuous summons, I would put money on this particular barghest being a special one.

Since obtaining Life Detection, I'd defeated sixty-nine monsters. While saving the pair, I'd killed another seven hellhounds, bringing the total up to seventy-six. In short, I needed to take down twenty-three more of these small fries. Then I could slay the special barghest and claim my reward.

"Might have to put my back into this fight."

Gripping a tomahawk in each hand, I faced the nine hellhounds, firing repeated water lances at them. Before the monsters could even come within biting distance, I continued blowing off their heads.

Only fourteen more to go!

When the next nine hellhounds met the same fate, the barghest growled, charging towards me. Its red eyes floated high in the air. Even on four legs, the creature seemed close to three meters tall.

"Hey, what happened to the next five?! Hurry up and summon them!"

I considered looking around for wandering orcs or night wolves, but this thick fog seemed to be the barghest's territory. Even with Life Detection, I couldn't sense a single other monster nearby.

A fiendishly powerful claw swiped past my side. Despite appearing in slow motion to me, it still provided quite the thrill. With the tomahawk in my right hand, I slashed the barghest's right hind leg with all my might. Limping away from me, the monster began the summoning process once again.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!"

Hopefully, the count of one hundred would remain true to the order in which I killed the monsters, not attacked them. With this prayer in mind, I slew five of the advancing hellhounds. Stepping lightly, I then dodged the remaining attacks, leaping directly in front of the barghest. I then hurled a continuous stream of the eight-centimeter iron balls at its head.

When the third iron ball pierced the barghest from its lower jaw to its head, the monster collapsed with a loud *thud*.

“Wh-What?”

Even so, the orb selection window didn’t appear.

“D-Don’t tell me it goes by order of attack!”

Crestfallen, I dropped to my knees, even as four hellhounds approached me. Just as I considered giving up, the fallen barghest let forth a growl.

“Oh, it’s still alive!”

Dodging the hellhounds, I fired off a rapid series of water lances. When the fourth one struck its target, the usual list appeared before my eyes. I held my breath, momentarily forgetting about the other four hellhounds.

Skill Orb: Otherworldly Language Comprehension | 1 / 1,000

Skill Orb: Darkness Magic (VI) | 1 / 2,000,000

With no time to choose, I slew the four attacking hellhounds with water lances. At that moment, the fog cleared, and just like usual, the defeated monster corpses vanished. Apparently, during fights resembling boss battles, you could only collect items once the encounter had fully concluded.

“Kei,” Miyoshi said. “I see the fog has cleared up, but are you okay?”

“Miyoshi, about the barghest’s orb...” As I started to explain, a beautiful, rainbow-colored orb appeared in front of me. “Uh, what?”

Making’s acquisition list still hadn’t been closed. In other words, this had to be a *natural* drop. Surprised, I touched the orb, the words “Otherworldly Language Comprehension” written on its surface.

Forgive my harsh words, LUC. You are doing your job!

“Kei, what’s that?” Miyoshi asked.

“Oh, your camera’s still live? Looks like the barghest naturally dropped an

orb.”

“Really? What is it?”

“Listen and be amazed. Otherworldly Language Comprehension.”

“Seriously?!”

Predictably, she sounded amazed. But according to this list, Otherworldly Language Comprehension had a drop rate of one in one thousand. Based on this information, bosses had a relatively high chance of possessing this orb, unlike common enemies. In other words, the dungeon creator was practically begging humanity to read the inscriptions. Someday, we could expect a fair number of these orbs to drop.

“Should we sell two language orbs for a king’s ransom?” I asked. “Or should I go ahead and select Darkness Magic?”

“Kei, does that mean Otherworldly Language Comprehension also appears on the orb list?”

“Indeed. With a drop rate of one in one thousand.”

“Regardless of what else is available, you *have* to select the language orb,” Miyoshi ordered. “No matter what.”

“Why? We already have one thanks to the natural drop.”

“Listen to me. If only two people in the world possess this skill, it will just lead to endless, circular arguments.”

I see. She’s not wrong about that.

Considering the boss barghest’s abilities, Darkness Magic VI had to be the black mist or summoning hellhounds. Yet even normal barghests could use these magical abilities. In all likelihood, even their non-boss counterparts possessed this skill orb.

“If you don’t choose the language orb, I’m going to strangle you,” Miyoshi threatened.

“Whoa, is that a death flag?”

Laughing, I selected Otherworldly Language Comprehension. Thankfully, my

hand didn't slip, meaning we now possessed two copies of the same orb.

Furthermore, a fair number of items had dropped all around me. No matter where you defeated a monster, items always appeared around you, and by touching them, you could learn their names. Both of these phenomena were identical to orbs.

Healing Potion (5) x 2

Cure Potion (7)

Fang: Hellhound x 8

Hide: Hellhound x 3

Tongue: Hellhound

Magic Crystal: Hellhound x 8

Hide: Hound of Hecate

Horn: Hound of Hecate

Magic Crystal: Hound of Hecate

"Materials and items, eh?" I asked. "Never seen these before. Still, why is an otherworldly monster referencing Hecate...?"

Unable to describe my current mood, I placed everything in Vault.

From across the creek, the woman with the compound bow called out to me. "Are you okay?!"

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah." Smiling vaguely, I washed my hands in the water. "But anyway, how's your teammate doing?"

I leapt over the creek and approached the pair. Lying on his side, the man was sweating profusely. His arm was in terrible condition.

"I've stopped the bleeding for now, but..." the woman trailed off, looking at the man with concern.

Could they be a couple?

Still, I found myself in a dilemma. After delivering them to the groups near the fifth-level entrance, I had planned to go our separate ways. I hesitated to take them back to our base. Though Miyoshi had brought an ordinary first aid kit, a hellhound seemed to have torn off the man's right forearm entirely. With a wound this severe, a doctor would probably amputate everything below the elbow and then administer treatment. An ordinary first aid kit wouldn't be enough.

"...Guess I have no other choice." I sighed.

"What?"

Sorry about this, Miyoshi.

I withdrew one of the potions from Vault, pretending it came from my backpack. "Do you want to use this?"



Touching the item, the woman let out a cry of shock. “Wh-What?! A healing potion?! And it’s fifth-ranked!”

Oh crap, I didn’t check its rank. Is five pretty high or something?

“Fifth-ranked?!” Miyoshi shouted at me through my earphones.

Looking between the potion and the man, the woman seemed conflicted. “B-But... This is too...”

“If you don’t use it soon, things will take a turn for the worse, right?”

Hearing my words, her expression changed to one of resolve. “Thank you so much. No matter what, I’ll pay you back.”

Running over to the man’s side, the woman let him drink the potion a little at a time.

Oh, so potions are drinkable? Wouldn’t pouring it on the affected area work just as well?

While I considered this, I yawned loudly. Even with Super Recovery, drowsiness could still overcome me if my nerves or attention relaxed. Otherwise, I would just turn into an insomniac.

Regardless, I continued watching the pair. Despite paling in comparison to Asha’s recovery, the effects of dungeon items remained as dramatic as ever. The man’s muscles and the inside of his forearm—which was even missing bone—began to swell before my very eyes. Over time, the limb finished regaining its original shape. A truly remarkable sight to behold.

As he finished drinking the potion, the wounded man made a full recovery. Waking from his daze, he finally regained full consciousness, staring at his arm curiously.

“Huh, big sis?” he said. “What’s going on?”

So, they’re siblings, huh?

“Shota!” the woman cried, her eyes tearful as she hugged her brother.

Looks like they get along.

“What in the world is... My arm... It’s reconnected?”

“That man over there...” the woman said, launching into an explanation of what had just transpired.

“A fifth-ranked potion?!” the man shouted.

Up until now, he had listened to the story silently. Yet after hearing the potion’s rank, he cried out in alarm, glaring daggers at me.

Uh, what? Aren’t you supposed to thank me here?

“I never asked you to save me,” the man said. “And my wound wasn’t that bad to begin with.”

“Sh-Shota?” the woman stammered.

Uh, what is this guy talking about?

“And anyway,” the man said, “you have no proof that I used the potion!”

“Calm down, Shota!” the woman reprimanded. “What are you even saying?!”

Strictly speaking, I probably did have proof, but to be honest, I didn’t care.

“S-Sorry about this,” the woman apologized. “My brother’s still confused.”

“You don’t need to apologize!” the man countered. “He’s deceiving you!”

I’m what now?

“That horny old man used a high-ranked potion for no reason whatsoever!” the man continued blustering. “He’s trying to trap us in debt so that he can do whatever he wants to you!”

“Shota!”

Wow! Never heard that one before. He could even scare the pants off the Buddha. Man, this is turning into a real pain in the ass.

“For what it’s worth, I *did* take a video,” Miyoshi told me through the earplugs. I could vividly imagine her shoulders quivering as she attempted to stifle her laughter.

“Um, I’ve had enough of this,” I said. “If you head in that direction, you’ll find the stairs leading back up to the fourth level. A number of teams are camping there. If you stay with them until morning, you should be able to go home.”

“Huh?” the man asked.

“But about the potion...” The woman trailed off.

“Leave it alone, sis! The guy says he’s had enough of this, so let’s go... By the way, what happened to Sakai and Toma?”

The guys who ran away, huh?

“They’re probably near the stairs as well, seeing as they ran away,” the woman said.

“Then let’s head over there right now!” the man shouted in reply.

Those men had left these siblings to become monster bait in order to flee. Knowing this, the woman looked conflicted.

“This is my contact information,” she said, handing me a card. “No matter what, I’ll pay you back, so... If you don’t mind my asking, what’s your name?”

“I’m not important enough to give my name,” I answered. “Your brother was bitten by a dog, and that’s it. Forget everything else that happened.”

“But...”

The woman stared at me, looking on the verge of tears. I could imagine her being a fundamentally good person. Sure, I *could* have been nicer to her, but being treated like a horny old man had left me somewhat irritated. Even though I knew she wasn’t to blame.

“What are you doing, sis?” the man called. “Let’s get out of here!”

“It’s okay,” I said. “And I apologize for speaking so harshly. Hurry up and go. I’m sure we’ll meet again some other time.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman apologized. “Please get in touch with me if you can.”

After I finished speaking, the woman chased after her younger brother.

“Her name’s Eri Mishiro, huh?” I muttered to myself.

Returning to the mobile base, I headed in the opposite direction of the siblings, storing her contact information in Vault.

When I returned to Dolly, Miyoshi greeted me with sparkling eyes. “Kei, that

was so fun to watch!”

My recent excursion must have looked like quite the action movie when viewed through a monitor. Still, I wanted nothing more than to take a shower, have something to eat, and catch some Z’s.

“By the way,” Miyoshi continued. “Do you know how much a fifth-ranked healing potion costs?”

“No, not really.”

“That’s what I thought,” Miyoshi said with a laugh, handing me a bottle of cold water. “First-ranked healing potions cost anywhere from one million to two million yen.”

“Wow.”

In other words, healing potions weren’t cheap, but a pro explorer wouldn’t be breaking the bank by buying one.

Taking a gulp of the water, I could feel the icy liquid spreading throughout my body. I must have been more exhausted than I’d originally thought.

Miyoshi then proceeded to explain the ranks and efficacies of healing potions, as well as their abilities to treat physical injuries.

First-ranked potions could repair simple fractures. In short, they were the perfect remedy for tennis and pitcher’s elbow. They would also repair ruptured tendons.

Second-ranked potions could repair complex fractures, eye injuries, and stomach wounds.

Third-ranked potions could heal extensive burns and reattach cleanly severed limbs.

Fourth-ranked potions could restore limbs that had been crushed into a pulp.

Even if one half of a person’s body had been damaged, fifth-ranked potions could restore them to normal.

And even if eighty percent of a person’s body had been damaged, sixth-ranked potions could restore them to normal.

If only a short amount of time had passed, seventh-ranked potions could restore a person's missing body parts.

Finally, potions ranked eighth or higher hadn't been discovered yet.

Based on this information, Asha would have needed a potion ranked eighth or higher. Unfortunately, no one could buy what hadn't been found.

"To determine the price of each potion, sellers use the market value of first-ranked potions as the standard," Miyoshi continued. "Then the price is calculated according to how often the potion drops. To be more specific, a potion will cost as much as the previous rank times its own rank."

"So, if a first-ranked potion costs one million yen, a second-ranked potion will cost one million times two. That's a total of two million. And third-ranked potions will cost two million times three for a total of six million."

To sum it up, multiplying the value of a first-ranked potion by the factorial of the applicable rank would calculate the new cost.

"Hmm," I mused. "By that logic, if the value of a first-ranked potion is a million yen, a fifth-ranked potion would cost..."

"One hundred and twenty million yen," Miyoshi finished.

"Hot damn..."

No wonder those siblings were so shocked.

"Most of the time, fifth-ranked potions don't make their way to the general pub—"

Interrupting Miyoshi, I quietly laid out the items I'd obtained on the table.

Healing Potion (5)

Cure Potion (7)

Fang: Hellhound x 8

Hide: Hellhound x 3

Tongue: Hellhound

Magic Crystal: Hellhound x 8

Hide: Hound of Hecate

Horn: Hound of Hecate

Magic Crystal: Hound of Hecate

“Kei, are these...?”

“The fruits of my labor, which I give unto you.”

Rummaging through the items, Miyoshi touched them to confirm their contents. “Okay, but this drop rate seems *way* off.”

“It’s probably thanks to my high LUC.”

When she touched a pale, yellow-green item that resembled a potion, Miyoshi’s head jerked up. “K-Kei, this is a seventh-ranked cure potion!”

I didn’t have a good sense of this item’s value, but if I applied our previous conversation to it, the factorial of seven would be 5040. Yeah, I suppose that would be a surprise.

“How are you so calm?” Miyoshi asked. “Unlike healing potions, cure potions are used to treat illnesses, and those of the seventh rank can completely treat most incurable diseases.”

“Seriously?”

“There are reports of seventh-ranked cure potions healing leukemia and even dementia.”

In response to that, I almost did a spit take. Also, cure potions treated dementia as an illness?

“Wouldn’t the restoration of neurons fall into the realm of healing potions?” I asked.

I mean, what would even happen to the person’s lost memories? If you simply restored the hardware back to normal, would all the saved data still be intact?

“Good question,” Miyoshi replied. “Like we discussed earlier, this might be a question of consciousness.”

“In that case, if we considered dementia to be an ‘injury’ to one’s neurons, wouldn’t a sixth-ranked healing potion cause a full recovery?”

“It seems possible, but there aren’t many places conducting that sort of research... In fact, there probably aren’t any.”

After all, a long line of people already wanted high-ranking potions. This situation didn’t allow researchers to use them in experiments with unknowable results.

“Cure potions are distributed relatively cheaply up to the fourth rank,” Miyoshi said. “But even those of the fourth rank can heal a number of difficult-to-treat diseases.”

Though healing and cure potions appeared with similar frequency, cure potions were more popular with civilians. Conversely, healing potions were more popular with explorers. This had resulted in different demand structures, and as a result, cure potions were slightly cheaper.

“How cheap are we talking?” I asked.

“At the very least, fourth-ranked cure potions cost nineteen million two hundred thousand yen.”

I couldn’t help but feel somewhat exasperated. “How could anyone call that inexpensive?”

If cure potions used the same formula as healing potions, those of the first rank would cost eight hundred thousand yen.

“Think about the actual cost of treating difficult diseases,” Miyoshi said. “Compared to the amount of money paid from insurance, the price of a cure potion is often far cheaper. The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare has even considered establishing a potion distribution organization to reduce insurance expenditures.”

If the government used potions to heal diseases with expensive treatments, that *could* reduce expenditure. In America, the contingency fee of Kymriah—a leukemia medicine—was 475,000 dollars. In Japan, the same medicine would cost thirty-three million yen, whether or not treatment succeeded. Put in those terms, twenty million yen did sound a lot cheaper.

And if a patient used the High-Cost Medical Expense Benefit, they would only have to pay the out-of-pocket limit. Furthermore, if the patient used the Eligibility Certificate Ceiling-Amount Application, they wouldn't need to pay for a certain period of time. Yes, this sounded like a win-win situation, but...

"Wouldn't this be terrible for drug development companies?" I asked.

"Because the distribution volume of potions is so small, it's not seen as a problem right now," Miyoshi replied. "But if the volume increases, it could become a matter of life and death for those companies. In all likelihood, they won't allow anyone to create potion distribution organizations."

In other words, if someone tried to distribute potions on a wide scale, their lives could be in danger.

"For *extremely* difficult-to-treat and incurable diseases, only potions ranked five and above are effective," Miyoshi continued. "Still, hardly any of these are in circulation, as the drop monsters increase in strength dramatically."

I see. So that's why drug development companies can ignore potions.

Miyoshi began to wrap up her lecture. "Of course, even if someone poured their heart into developing treatments for diseases of this class, there are too few patients to turn a profit. As a contribution to humankind, those treatments would be wonderful, but there probably aren't any investors."

"So even if potions of the fifth rank and higher were distributed, it wouldn't have much of an effect on drug development?"

"Probably not. And currently, a seventh-ranked cure potion costs roughly four billion and thirty-two million yen. Because they're not in circulation, this value was simply calculated from the drop rate."

That being said...

"Who would even buy such an expensive medicine?" I asked.

"A wealthy person with acute dementia who hasn't decided how to distribute their inheritance, maybe?"

"I see... So, how much does a seventh-ranked healing potion cost?"

"A little over five billion yen."

“Are you shitting me?!” I cried.

“Explorers are an asset. If they die, their skills go up in flames too. The top explorers of various countries are viewed as national assets that must be kept alive at any cost.”

“You mean to say five billion yen is cheap to insure an irreplaceable piece of machinery?”

Miyoshi nodded. “Even including maintenance, that’s less than the entire cost of a single fighter aircraft.”

“That view seems a little warped to me.”

“But in reality, potions are difficult and costly to acquire. Monsters usually don’t drop them as easily as *this...*”

Yeah, she’s probably right. If most explorers use the expedition style, they must have to dive countless times in order to obtain a potion.

“In that case, I could—” I began to speak.

“If you want to become a hero, be my guest,” Miyoshi interrupted me. “But no matter how much you struggle on your own, you’ll only enrich the middlemen and women. The price won’t fall a single yen. There’s just not enough supply.”

“Guess you’re right.”

Unlike skill orbs, items had no expiration date. This gave the middlemen the opportunity to set up black markets... Or do business, I mean.

“Also,” Miyoshi said. “I wouldn’t recommend handing out potions to people who can’t obtain them on their own.”

“Why’s that?”

“Imagine all the people who will say, ‘Why was *he* given one when *I* wasn’t?’ Plenty of individuals won’t be able to stand that.”

I couldn’t distribute potions to everyone who needed them. In that case, I would be selecting who lived and died. Obviously, the people I *didn’t* select would resent me.

“You saw that young man’s reaction firsthand, didn’t you?” Miyoshi asked. “I won’t say he reacted normally, but... expect there to be many others like him.”

I sighed. “Guess things can’t always go your way.”

“If you think of potions as jewels or works of art, you won’t feel as bad.”

Well, I can always count on Miyoshi to be decisive.

“So,” I said, changing the subject. “Fangs, horns, and hides aside, what are tongues and magic crystals used for?”

“Magic crystals contain high amounts of energy.”

“What does that mean, exactly? Can you use magic crystals as a replacement for oil or something?”

“Above average monsters occasionally drop these magic crystals,” Miyoshi explained. “They aren’t well-known to the general public, but apparently, countries with low fossil fuel reserves are extremely interested in them. They’re sometimes called ‘clean plutonium’.”

“They’re *that* valuable?”

Since the appearance of dungeons, the world had been transforming on a daily basis. Before long, humanity would come to rely upon the dungeons as we did oil. Perhaps we were already halfway there.

“There are a lot of barriers blocking us from putting magic crystals into practical use,” Miyoshi continued. “But looking at the ones you have here, the Hound of Hecate seems to be one of the highest quality crystals in existence.”

The hellhounds’ magic crystals weren’t even two centimeters in diameter. However, the Hound of Hecate’s crystal—which shone with a bewitching light—was about the size of a softball.

“And what about the tongues?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I think they’re rare materials, but... Oh, I got a hit! Um, what the heck?!”

“What’s up?”

“Um...” Miyoshi hesitated. “According to this, it’s food!”

“As in the stuff we eat?!”

I had a million things to say about genetic problems and protein structures, but who the hell would eat an organism that didn't even exist on Earth? Compared to the dangers of eating GMOs, this was on a completely different level.

“What happened to medical inspections and food safety protocols?” I asked.

“Just like possible dungeon epidemic prevention, no one seems too concerned. Even so...”

“Yeah?”

“Apparently, these tongues are mouth wateringly delicious. Yum...”

“Listen here, Miyoshi...”

True, flavor was justice, but even so, you ran the risk of suddenly rejecting your humanity.

“One more thing,” Miyoshi added.

“What's that?”

“Eating dungeon-produced food tends to improve various abilities.”

“...Seriously?”

Is this related to statuses as well?

Suppose one person used something to improve their abilities. In order to keep competing, another person would have to use the same thing. For instance, if an enemy country built nuclear weapons, your country would have to do so as well. Same logic.

Stat increases might be advancing humanity, but won't these improvements only deepen our reliance on the dungeons?

“Why doesn't anyone worry about the dungeons suddenly disappearing?” I asked. “I mean, they did appear out of nowhere to begin with.”

“Corporations can't worry about the sky falling,” Miyoshi replied. “It's more important and healthier for them to indulge in whatever profits they can earn right now.”

“And even if you created something to prevent the sky from falling, no one would buy it if there wasn’t an impending disaster.”

“Exactly.”

I sighed. In the end, nothing would come of us commoners worrying over such matters.

“Well, let’s leave these problems to the powers that be,” I concluded. “At any rate, we’ve obtained two copies of the highly coveted Otherworldly Language Comprehension orb. What should we do with them?”

“What can we do besides sell them?” Miyoshi asked. “Do *you* plan on using one?”

“Definitely not. This thing’s gonna decide the fate of the world.”

“No kidding. I would like to sell one of them, but... Won’t America and Russia endlessly try to outbid one another?”

“About that. These won’t remain so expensive forever.”

I conveyed the orb drop rate of the Hound of Hecate—which had been an irregular, rare monster—to Miyoshi.

In response, Miyoshi cocked her head. “You’re right. Based on that drop rate, someone is practically begging us to read the inscriptions.”

But that’s the problem. Who is that someone?

I had a lot on my mind. The dungeon’s rules, which conformed to Earth’s culture to a bizarre extent. The inscription’s confirmation of the Dungeon Passage Theory, which had seemed laughable. And finally, the dungeon’s influence on our world, which was spreading like an addictive drug.

Perhaps everyone on Earth had been monitored since their birth, and we were living in a simulation similar to *The Matrix*. I almost expected Agent Smith to attack me at any moment.

As Making’s sole user, perhaps I would have to assassinate a potentially disastrous presidential candidate, much like Christopher Walken in a certain movie. [\(3\)](#)

“Either way,” Miyoshi said, “just putting them up for auction feels as though we’re shirking our duty as Japanese citizens. Change of subject, but can you store the items in Vault, Kei? Just as a precaution, since we don’t know how the passage of time will affect them.”

“Got it. Well then, I’m going to take a shower, have something to eat, and then get some sleep.”

“Roger that. I’ll head to bed after organizing today’s data.”

That data included film we’d recorded during this excursion, the 3D maps our cameras had generated, the monsters’ experience points, and various other parameters.

“Come to think of it,” Miyoshi said, “this information is so valuable that it would make researchers around the world drown in their own drool.”

“If you’re worried about thieves, just put the entire PC in Storage. Only take it out when you need to use it.”

“Good idea! Still, my work schedule is probably going to look like Salaryman Yamada’s.”

“You’re going to keep pulling these all-nighters?” I asked with a sigh. “Take a break, Miyoshi. But in that case, should we install SECOM in our office?”

“If some organization actually came after us, they would probably be skilled enough to thwart a private security company. But for the time being, our windows do have protection against laser listening devices.”

I vaguely remembered having that conversation. Remodeling our office must have cost quite a bit of money. In the beginning, I’d wanted to keep a low profile, but lately, staying out of the limelight had started to seem impossible. My current situation felt as though I’d started riding downhill on a minecart, only to realize the vehicle didn’t have brakes.

“Anyway, let’s group together all our important possessions,” I suggested. “If worse comes to worst, we can store it all at once and run away.”

“Sounds good,” Miyoshi replied. “Maybe we should build a safe room too. That will buy you time to come to my rescue.”

"I *really* don't want to end up fighting with a foreign country."

"Wait, you wouldn't come save me?"

"Guh... No, I probably would."

Miyoshi laughed. "And that's what makes you both terrible and wonderful."

November 23, 2018 (Friday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

By noon of the next day, we decided to call our exploration quits and return to the surface for the time being. All told, we had spent an entire day in the dungeon. And on top of that, we had only dived to the fifth level, finally surpassing the beginner's floors.

"Still, we got what we wanted," Miyoshi said. "Isn't that enough?"

"I suppose so."

Ignoring everything, I sometimes ran while carrying Miyoshi. As a result, we returned to the surface at around two o'clock in the afternoon.

"Good work in there," I said.

"You too," Miyoshi replied. "So, what do you plan on doing now?"

"Guess I'll try contacting Naruse."

"Don't tell her we have the language orb, okay?"

"Yeah, of course. I might as well admit to having preservation technology."

"Ding, ding!" Miyoshi trilled. "Correct answer! Well then, I'll just head home and play around with all the cute little numbers I've collected. Looks like these drop rates have rules attached to them."

"Cool. In that case, I'll go home and change first."

"Then shall we head out?"

"Yeah, let's go."

Shibuya

After showering and changing, I called Naruse, inviting her to meet me at the Hachiko statue in front of Shibuya station. Naruse arrived in a hurry, and upon hearing what I had to say, her eyes widened.

“Huh, really?” she asked. “You’ll be able to obtain the language orb?!”

“Yeah. I think so, anyway.”

We then headed towards the flagship Tokyu Department Store. Blending in with the crowd, we started talking. This method would be the best way to throw off wiretappers. While discussing the language orb, I couldn’t feign ignorance, but at the same time, I couldn’t trust the JDA conference rooms either. I still remembered the incident with Executive Director Mizuho.

“Still, I never expected results this quickly,” Naruse said. “Didn’t you leave on your exploration yesterday?”

“Well, you can thank Miyoshi and me for the quick turnaround—it was a team effort.”

The Shibuya Scramble crosswalk light turned green. Going with the flow of traffic, we crossed the intersection diagonally and began walking down Inokashira Street.

“Your team effort...?” Naruse repeated, her expression completely dumbfounded.

For the past two months, dungeon-related organizations and intelligence agencies across the world had been devoting their full efforts to finding this orb. None of them had uncovered so much as a clue. Nevertheless, a single party of two explorers had just given a hopeful report on finding the orb. Moreover, only ten days had passed since the JDA’s initial request, and the party in question had spent less than two days diving.

Under normal circumstances, a person like Naruse would question my sanity, much less my report.

“So in the end, what kind of monster drops the orb?” Naruse asked. “Is it one of the clan shamans, like you talked about earlier?”

“Actually, we still haven’t inspected the shamans,” I answered.

“What? Then where are your ‘high hopes’ coming from?”

“Hmm... If I must tell you, I’m banking everything on luck.”

While side-eyeing an incomprehensible display above Seibu Shibuya, I offered a vague, seemingly incomprehensible response of my own. With the future always being uncertain, no amount of logic could deny luck. As such, luck would be my strongest excuse. Yet at the same time, it would also prove difficult to confirm.

In response, Naruse merely sighed.

“Hypothetically, if we do find the orb, what should we do with it?” I asked.
“Put it up for auction?”

Wearing a troubled expression, Naruse didn’t answer immediately.

Miyoshi and I didn’t know who’d brought this matter to the JDA. Likewise, we didn’t know why it had circled around to us. To be frank, I only knew one thing—the entire world wanted this orb.

As we turned left at the corner of Seibu, I found a crab display looming over us. Looking at the signage for Kani Doraku, I considered how most people could never turn down crab. “You really are a sucker for advertisements,” Miyoshi probably would have mocked me again.

Scratching my head, I tried to get a rise out of Naruse. “According to Miyoshi, we could make over a billion dollars off this orb...”

“I can’t make a decision on my own,” Naruse replied. “Is it all right with you if I bring this matter to my superiors?”

“I don’t mind, but remember this—we still haven’t obtained the orb. But just in case we do, I’d like to know what the JDA thinks we should do with it.”

“Understood.”

Passing under a MUJI sign, I stopped before a remodeled Apple Store and turned towards Naruse, who was walking behind me diagonally.

“If you don’t mind, offer a prayer to the big man upstairs,” I said. “Ask that

everything goes according to plan, and we find this orb.”

Looking up, I found the cross of the Tokyo Yamate Church gazing down upon us silently. Below the cross, Hebrew writing proclaimed the peace of God.

Ichigaya Bridge

“That’s a summary of the situation,” Miharuru said. “What should we do?”

After returning to the JDA, she’d grabbed hold of Section Chief Saiga, forcefully dragging him out into the city of Ichigaya. The pair had then walked down Yasukuni Street at a quick pace. When they started crossing Ichigaya Bridge, Miharuru brought up D-Powers.

“Only ten days have passed since you told D-Powers about the language orb,” Saiga replied, leaning back against the bridge’s guardrail. “And afterwards, they returned from their exploration in a single day with good news. Quite incredible, don’t you think?”

Normally, Miharuru would have considered this information to be utter nonsense. However, they were dealing with the enigmatic D-Powers.

“So, why did you drag me all the way out here?” Saiga asked.

“Yoshimura doesn’t seem to trust the JDA or the SDF in this matter.”

Hearing this, Saiga nodded. Yoshimura was a lowly, G-ranked explorer who had formed a party with Azusa Miyoshi. Furthermore, he was a complete novice, having only acquired his WDA ID two months ago. Based on Saiga’s investigations, Yoshimura and Miyoshi had been colleagues at the same company until a little while ago. This seemed to be their only point of contact. And according to all reports, Yoshimura was neither exceptional nor incompetent as an explorer.

Nevertheless, Saiga suspected Yoshimura of having secrets not available on any paper.

“Hmm,” Saiga mused. “Once people know where the language orb comes from, the entire world will try to claim one for themselves.”

“So, should we give them permission to auction off the orb?”

“Even if we do give them that permission, would D-Powers really auction off such an orb?”

Auctioning off Otherworldly Language Comprehension would invite trouble. Based on the reports Saiga had read, D-Powers didn’t have the power to prevent such conflicts.

After a short pause, Miharu turned towards Saiga, who still leaned back on the guardrail. “After my conversation with Yoshimura, something occurred to me,” she said. “You selected me as D-Powers’ full-time supervisor in order to make them search for this orb. It doesn’t matter whose order you were acting under. If this orb goes up for auction, the bidding will reach a billion dollars. And if Russia has information they’re hiding for some reason, the winning bid could even reach ten billion dollars. As the JDA... No, as Japan, keeping this transaction within our own nation would be beneficial.”

Pausing, Miharu looked up at the sky.

“That being said...” she continued weakly. “Even if we tried to purchase the orb directly from D-Powers, it could wind up costing over ten billion dollars. Without clear and direct orders, we underlings can’t move a muscle.”

Everything Miharu had said was exactly right. Saiga had ordered her to persuade D-Powers to search for the language orb. Regardless, he hadn’t done so with any real confidence. Rather, he’d merely fumbled around for various ways to solve this dilemma. *If one of these leads to some sort of hint, that would be a godsend*, he’d thought, not considering anything else.

Over the past two months, government agencies across the world had dedicated their full strength to this investigation without producing any results. Yet in ten days, a party containing two novice explorers had succeeded in finding the solution. Who could have imagined such a thing?

“I know,” Saiga finally replied. “But I can’t make the decision either. I’ll have to bring this to my superiors.”

Still, who is the right person to discuss this with, exactly? If I bring this to the wrong party, everything could collapse.

“Just in case, I should remind you not to mention D-Powers’ involvement to

anyone else,” Miharū added.

“Understood. If we upset them, this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity could go up in flames.”

“And I would hate to see Japan’s liberalism trampled under the foot of ‘what’s best for the nation’.”

“Indeed,” Saiga agreed. “I’ll keep my mouth shut to prevent that from happening.”

“Please do. Even so, I need you to decide on a time frame. That’s the first step in bringing something to your superiors, right?”

“True, but it’s already Friday. I was looking forward to the weekend.”

“In the US, government agents would start moving in two hours flat, even on a Sunday.”

Saiga chuckled dryly. “No arguments there. I’ll have an answer for you at the start of next week on the twenty-sixth. I apologize, but please put this matter on hold until then.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Saiga looked forward, a tremendous sigh escaping his lips. Underneath the setting sun, the outer moat of the former Edo Castle shone with a crimson glow. Despite the approaching weekend, he would soon be very busy.

Yoyogi-Hachiman

Since the first D-Powers expedition had ended far earlier than expected, I placed a call to fulfill another promise.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I said. “I finished up my work in two days. If you have nothing planned for this weekend, I can tag along with you.”

“Sounds great!” Mitsurugi replied. “I’d love to get together!”

“What days work for you?”

“I have Saturday and Sunday off! So... Can we hang out on both days?”

“Fine by me. Shall we go GTB hunting on one of those days?”

“What’s that?” Mitsurugi asked.

“Hunting for goblin treasure boxes,” I clarified. “But only if you’re not opposed to killing goblins.”

“In that case, you can keep me company during my special training on Saturday. And on Sunday, we’ll go GTB hunting.”

“Got it. Then on Saturday, we’ll meet up at Yoyogi with the usual equipment. Does nine o’clock in the morning work for you?”

“Nine o’clock is perfect,” Mitsurugi said. “I’m looking forward to it! See you tomorrow.”

After confirming that she’d hung up, I tapped my phone, ending the call.

“Was that Mitsurugi?” Miyoshi asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m tagging along for her special training, like we promised before.”

“A date on the weekend? Normies, get off my board!”

“It’s not a date. But anyway, what are you doing this weekend?”

Miyoshi sighed. “I’ll stay here all by my lonesome, hanging out with my cute little numbers for the entire weekend. If this keeps up, I might attain enlightenment soon.”

“Well, isn’t that just swell?”

In response, Miyoshi simply glared at me.

“So, did you figure anything out?” I asked.

“I calculated the drop rate of the monsters you defeated.”

“Nice. Learn anything interesting?”

“With our sample size being so small, I can’t say anything definitively. But for monsters with standard drop items, their drop rate seemed to be about twenty-five to fifty percent. At least when you defeated them.”

Miyoshi had no idea if these numbers were high or low, as no proper statistics

were available. She couldn't find any subjects for comparison either.

"Also, the drop rate for magic crystals was around twenty-five percent," Miyoshi continued. "There are probably variances between different monsters, but either way, I have no idea how a person's LUC relates to any of these numbers."

Yeah. And like I said, we have no samples for comparison. A problem for another day, I guess.

"To make things worse, we only have around thirty hellhounds to use as references," I noted.

"Thirty-four to be precise. With such a small sample size, there's no hard evidence—that's for sure."

Well, if we continue to organize our findings, we'll learn a little more in the near future.

"Good work," I said. "Should we go to Morille again to celebrate?"

"Yeah! Your treat, right?"

"Listen here, Miyoshi... Even without me footing the bill, you're wealthy enough to eat three meals at Morille every day. Even if they're not open in the mornings."

Lately, I'd been using our company card almost exclusively. However, when I'd used my personal card at an ATM the other day, I'd done a double take. My balance had been a whopping two hundred million yen.

Come to think of it, Miyoshi mentioned that one percent of our party's earnings would be deposited into our personal account each month. In that case, she must have the same amount of money in her account. And not even two months have passed since we quit our old jobs...

"Eating at the same place every day would be so mundane," Miyoshi said. "Plus, it would cause the restaurant a ton of grief. They would have to keep changing the menu."

"That's what you take issue with?" I asked.

"And as for the biggest problem..."

“Yeah?”

“I’d definitely put on weight.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed. “Anyway, do you still want to go?”

“Of course. But when?”

“Let’s see... They’re open on Sundays, right?”

“That should be fine. They’re actually closed on Mondays, if I’m not mistaken. But isn’t your date on Sunday?”

“I’m telling you—it’s not a date,” I grumbled. “Since the three of us haven’t seen each other in a little while, I’ll bring Mitsurugi as well.”

“You’re going to have me—another woman—show up on your dinner date? That’s the worst.”

“How many times do I have to repeat myself? This *isn’t* a date.”

“This is exactly why you’re single, Kei.”

Despite Miyoshi’s exasperated tone of voice, Mitsurugi and I didn’t have that sort of relationship. The three of us having dinner together wouldn’t be a problem.

Thus, I made reservations for three.

November 24, 2018 (Saturday)

Yoyogi-Dungeon

On Saturday, I headed to our meeting place—Yoyogi Dungeon. There, Mitsurugi offered me a small wave from an inconspicuous corner seat of YD Café. Seeing a classic beauty act so adorably packed quite the punch. Misreading her signals could have caused my face to go slack, but somehow, I managed to keep my expression firm while heading towards the table.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I apologized.

“No trouble. I just got here a little while ago. Would you like something to drink?”

Mitsurugi had almost finished drinking her café au lait.

“If it’s okay with you, I think we should head out now,” I said.

“Sounds good!”

I had already used the Life Detection orb, though not necessarily for today. Fundamentally speaking, its functions seemed passive. Yet when we descended into the dungeon and I became conscious of it, Life Detection began working. Put simply, I gained a vague awareness of where nearby people and monsters were located.

“This way,” I said. Taking the lead, I found a slime much faster than usual. “Since this is special training, should we try for a new best record today?”

“Yes! That sounds like fun!”

This positive attitude is probably what made Mitsurugi so incredible. Afterwards, we silently continued dashing back and forth to the entrance, using Life Detection to locate the slimes. At this tempo, I felt close to enlightenment just by tagging along.

We even skipped lunch to keep beating up slimes, and as a result, Mitsurugi averaged fifty kills per hour. A little over six hours later, she’d recorded three hundred vanquished slimes. By defeating so many of them, she would have earned six status points today.

Just by tagging along, I’d also earned a new high score of 150 slimes. However, because leaving the entrance together would have made us stand out, I waited inside the dungeon each time. As such, I hadn’t received the “reset benefit.”

“Running back and forth sure is tiring,” Mitsurugi said with a sigh.

“Three hundred slimes is probably a world record,” I noted.

“Yes, because I barely lost any time looking for the little guys. You really are amazing, Yoshimura. How were you able to find them so quickly?”

“Oh, just coincidence.”

As I said this, Mitsurugi’s stomach let forth an adorable growl. Her face turning red, she looked down. At four o’clock in the afternoon, lunch had ended

a long time ago, but it was still too early for dinner. Regardless, I could think of one place to fill our stomachs.

“Come to think of it, we didn’t have lunch,” I said. “Want to grab something to eat from YD Café before heading home?”

“Sure!”

A little while later, we each ate a pasta set from the café, confirmed our plans for the next day, and went our separate ways.

Yoyogi-Hachiman

“I’m home,” I announced.

“Oh!” Miyoshi cried. “King Normie deigns to grace me with his presence once more!”

“Pipe down. Oh, speaking of which, I had an incredible experience today.”

“What happened? Did you kiss Mitsurugi inside the dungeon? If so, I’m not the least bit interested.”

“Who do you think I am?!” I shouted in response. “Thanks to Life Detection, I hunted like never before, defeating a total of 155 slimes.”

“And?”

“So obviously, the orb selection window popped up, right? I managed to grab the orb without drawing Mitsurugi’s attention, but when I defeated my next hundred slimes, none of the other options had completed their cooldown times. And so...”

Miyoshi took the bait, her eyes transforming into yen signs. “Did a secret function reveal itself?!”

“No, the selection window didn’t even pop up. I didn’t realize that the opportunity had passed by until a while later.”

“Thank you ever so much for that unpleasant, boring information. To sum it up, you basically threw our money down the drain, correct?”

“C’mon, it’s nice to have new experiences, right?” I asked. “Also, YD Café’s

pasta set wasn't anything to write home about. It can only be described as 'mid'."

"Now that's the kind of info I appreciate."

"Really?"

Miyoshi cocked her head. "Still, the selection window didn't even pop up? I almost thought Making would provide a warning like 'Clever players will always consider having enough room in their inventory when picking up another item'!"[\(4\)](#)

"Wow, what an obscure reference. How old are you again?"

November 25, 2018 (Sunday)

Yoyogi Dungeon

When I arrived at YD Café the next day, I found Mitsurugi in her usual inconspicuous corner seat, waving to me delicately. Yet this time, Saito was sitting at her side.

"Nice to see you again," I told Saito.

"Yeah, it's been too long," she replied. "I heard about your sushi party the other day. I so wanted to go!"

"You were filming a drama, right? I heard you've been busy."

"Sure, I've been getting plenty of roles, but no *leading* roles."

Raising both arms, Saito slammed her fists against the table in apparent indignation. However, because she was pantomiming, the action produced no sound.

Once our drinks had arrived, Saito took a sip of her black tea, continuing her monologue. "Dungeons really are amazing, though. At first, I had no choice but to tag along with Haru, but this girl takes everything so seriously, y'know? She would just hunt slimes in complete silence. Since standing at a distance would have been both dangerous and pointless, I ended up following her lead, spraying slimes and cracking their beads without making a sound. And then..."

At this, Saito looked at Mitsurugi, who scratched her cheek out of embarrassment.

“About two weeks later, I had an audition for a minor role,” Saito continued. “When I was there, my body moved exactly how I wanted it to. I couldn’t believe what was happening! After that, I spent each and every day with Haru, silently hunting slimes in the dungeon.”

Despite the role being minor, the audition had been highly competitive. Once Saito had become the clear choice for the part, rumors about her had spread throughout the director’s connections. Since then, she’d received one acting offer after another.

“Before long, I could even memorize scripts after reading them only once,” Saito added. “Could this be a result of dungeon diving making me smarter?”

Because she’d hunted slimes while paying close attention to Mitsurugi, perhaps her INT had increased.

“Even so...” Saito trailed off.

“Yes?” I asked.

“I still haven’t landed any leading roles. Probably because I don’t have the name recognition.”

“You’ll land those roles eventually, right?”

“That would be great, but... I can be a famous supporting actress when I’m old! Leading roles are for the young! I want to be a star right now!”

Moving her chair with a clatter, Saito sat beside me, grabbing my right arm and pushing her chest against me.



Is this girl trying to honey trap me?

“Yoshimura!” Saito whined. “I need you to become my angel!”

“What do you mean by *angel*?” I asked.

“An angel investor for a movie,” Mitsurugi replied, peeling Saito away from me.

“Yeah, I don’t have that kind of money,” I said. “I’m just your everyday working man.”

Placing an elbow on the table, Saito supported her chin with a palm, glaring up at me. “Then how did you afford a tribute of such incredible pearl earrings for a girl you just met?”

“Uh, a tribute...? Listen, those earrings were only meant to celebrate the accomplishments of my apprentice slime exterminator.”

“How much do you think earrings in the M Collection are worth?! The number of zeroes is mind-boggling. I’ve been working pretty hard myself, and you haven’t given me anything.”

Since I’d been in such a hurry, I hadn’t actually looked at the price. I’d simply placed the order, confirmed the item, handed over my credit card, and signed the receipt.

“Fine,” I said. “If you land a leading role, I’ll ‘pay tribute’ to my other adorable apprentice.”

“Really?!” Saito cried. “It’s a promise then!”

As she rejoiced, a lovely smile spread across her face. I couldn’t tell where Saito’s acting began and ended, which frightened me to some degree. Of course, she was probably being completely earnest.

“Still, you’re always honest about your desires, aren’t you?” I asked.

Saito chuckled haughtily. “Being honest about your desires isn’t a bad thing, especially in the acting world. If you start compromising, no roles will ever come your way. Fortune favors the bold, after all!” Following this audacious statement, she adopted a graceful air, letting forth a refined laugh and posing

coquettishly. “Of course, I usually give off a completely different impression!”

I felt more impressed than exasperated with this version of Saito. “Seems like you’re overflowing with vitality.”

“Ryoko’s feeling a little repressed, what with being so busy lately,” Mitsurugi said.

“And what exactly am I *repressing*?” Saito asked. “You sure have it nice, Haruka. He’s treating you well, right?”

Mitsurugi turned red, bringing her hands to her cheeks. “What do you mean?”

C’mon, blushing here will have the opposite effect you want.

“What are you implying, exactly?” I asked.

“You’re helping her feel less *repressed*,” Saito replied. Chuckling smugly, she wore an expression that seemed to say, “Isn’t it obvious?”

Jeez. Should a woman on her way to becoming a popular actress be making crass jokes in such a public place?

“Change of subject,” I said. “After today’s exploration, I was thinking of inviting Mitsurugi out for dinner. Would you like to join us, Saito?”

“In the evening? My schedule is open, but won’t I be in the way?”

“Nope. Miyoshi is coming too.”

Seeming disappointed, Saito looked between Mitsurugi and me. “Oh, you’re bringing another girl?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not really. But you’re paying, right?” Once again, Saito grabbed my arm, pressing herself against me. “In that case, of course I’ll go!”

And here I was hoping to avoid the paparazzi, but we look like a couple.

I contacted the restaurant, asking if they could increase the number of seats by one. Luckily, everything worked out okay.

“Still, you’re quite the catch,” Saito told me.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, you seem like the typical nice guy who isn’t liable to cheat. Plus, you’re rich and not too bad in the looks department. I suppose researchers are nothing to sneeze at.”

Did she just size me up from head to toe? And I’m definitely not your “typical nice guy,” m’lady! If the right partner and opportunity arises, I refuse to be friend zoned! But for now, I’m going to curl up into a ball and cry.

“With a bit of polishing, we STEM guys can really sparkle,” I said. “But hardly anyone ever lends a helping hand.”

“Is that right?” Saito asked. “In that case, you should introduce me to someone with potential, and I’ll help polish him right up.”

Whoa, where is this young lady even getting these ideas?

If you let Saito keep talking without interruption, she could say some terrifying things. And so I finished my remaining coffee in a single gulp, then got to my feet.

“Well then, let’s be on our way,” I suggested.

We descended into the dungeon, but unlike usual, we headed towards the stairs to the second level.

“This is our first time coming this way,” Mitsurugi noted.

“Yeah, we usually head in the opposite direction right away,” Saito replied.

The two women looked around curiously, but the first level’s scenery didn’t change much from place to place. Still, even if they had zero experience with the lower levels, Mitsurugi had entered the triple digit rankings, and Saito had reached the top end of the four digit rankings. Both of them would be able to handle goblins with ease.

“This is your first time hunting goblins, right?” I asked. “FYI, they’re humanoid. If that makes you uncomfortable, don’t force yourself to kill them.”

“Might as well give it a shot,” Saito replied, swinging her arm in a circle.

“Should we just punch them?”

Uh, you plan on punching them with your bare hands?

Feeling exasperated, I withdrew two compound bows from my bag. Since the conception of RPGs, characters with a DEX base had conventionally used bows. Originally, I'd brought two bows for Mitsurugi and myself, but with Saito joining us, I would guard from nearby. Even using magic if necessary.

“Huh, a bow?” Saito asked. “I've never used one before.”

“I have some experience with kyudo, but this is my first time using archery equipment,” Mitsurugi admitted.

“Well, you've both gained plenty of strength from defeating so many first-floor slimes,” I said. “If you learn how to use these bows, you should be able hit your target, even on your first day.”

That's just how statuses worked.

“You sure about that?” Saito asked.

“Yep, yep,” I answered. “Now then, I'll teach you how to fire an arrow.”

“Okay.”

Unlike a Japanese bow, you nocked the arrow on the left side rather than the right. Next, you only pulled the bowstring to your jaw, not all the way back. Finally, I explained how to use the releaser. Having faith in their high DEX, I'd added triggerless clickers to the bows.

“Pull back the bowstring until it feels taut,” I explained. “Afterwards, take aim and add a little more tension to the bowstring. That should cause your arrow to release.”

After seeing Mishiro use a compound bow, I'd gotten curious and researched the weapon. That had proven useful.

“Well then, let's see what you can do,” I told the two.

Life Detection could very clearly differentiate between humans and goblins. As such, I led the girls away from people and towards a location with stray goblins.

“Oh, there’s one now,” Saito said. “Can I shoot it?”

“Go ahead,” I replied.

“All righty then...”

As Saito pulled back her bowstring, she already looked like a professional archer. With a whooshing sound, her arrow soared through the air, piercing a goblin up ahead. The stricken monster immediately transformed into black light, vanishing from sight.

“Great job,” I said. “Feel okay about slaying goblins?”

“Probably,” Saito answered. “Since I’m standing at a distance, and they don’t leave a corpse, it doesn’t feel too real.”

Afterwards, Mitsurugi fired a test shot, and also succeeded in vanquishing a goblin. Based on this situation alone, I couldn’t tell which girl had the higher DEX.

“Nice,” I said. “Since both of you seem to be doing okay, let’s start our GTB hunt. That being said, I’ve never looked for goblin treasure boxes either.”

“Oh, I did some research on this!” Mitsurugi chimed in.

“That’s great. For now, let’s search for something that looks like a nest.”

Using Life Detection, I headed towards a location that seemed to be a nest.

“You’re walking pretty fast,” Saito noted, nudging her elbow into my side. “Do you know this area well? Or did you inspect the place ahead of time for today?”

“Don’t let your guard down,” I warned. “Once we turn this corner, we’ll come up on a community of around twenty-five goblins. If they come within five meters of us, I’ll take care of them, so stay calm and keep firing.”

“Understood,” Mitsurugi said.

“We’re counting on you,” Saito added.

“And don’t hit me,” I said. “I won’t be the setup for some stupid joke like ‘Whoops, thought you were a goblin!’”

Saito giggled. “Of course, of course.”

Why do I still feel so uneasy...?

When we rounded the corner, Mitsurugi's and Saito's arrows assaulted the goblin community with nary a sound. During the fight, several of the creatures ran towards us, but I finished them off with water lances. Seeing this magic for the first time, both women appeared somewhat surprised. Nevertheless, they continued firing their arrows until the end.

"Good job," I said.

While pretending to pick up the used arrows, I replaced the projectiles with new ones from Vault, refilling the pair's quivers.

"We hit quite a few of them," Saito remarked. "The next time someone asks me what my hobbies are, maybe I should respond with 'archery'."

Mitsurugi shook her head. "Don't be such a show-off, Ryoko."

"I'm serious. Archery sounds like a pretty cool hobby, right? Don't some people even go bowhunting?"

"Bowhunting?" I repeated. "Yeah, it's done in the West, but apparently, it's outlawed in Japan."

"Huh?" Saito asked. "How is it any different from rifle hunting?"

"Bows being far weaker than rifles is what causes the problem."

Bringing down prey with a bow could be quite difficult, and if the archer failed to kill the animal, it could run away while wounded. After failing to capture the fleeing animal, the archer might try bringing down another one, as this technically wouldn't violate hunting regulations. However, if the animal died somewhere, the end result would be no different from overhunting. In the West, people had also raised concerns over making the animals suffer needlessly.

"But since kyudo is purely a sport in Japan, I do understand how bowhunting sounds kind of cool," I said.

"Right?" Saito agreed.

While having this discussion, we found a location surrounded by rocks. It was where the goblins had been.

“This must be the nest,” I said. “But how do we actually locate the GTB?”

“Usually, it’s inside a box,” Mitsurugi replied. “Or it’s hidden inside a space with a rock being used for a lid.”

“Interesting.”

“Oh, Haru!” Saito cried. “Is this it?”

Rummaging around in the back, she’d found something by rapping her knuckles against a hollow.

Mitsurugi tilted her head. “How do we open this?”

“Well, we have a man here to help out on such occasions,” Saito replied.

Though Saito never changed, she was so straightforward that I couldn’t help but like her. Strange. Well, I supposed that was just her personality.

“All right, all right,” I said. “I’ll do my very least to help out.”

Currently, I hadn’t maxed out my statuses, but I had raised them enough to deal with any threats on the beginner levels. Of course, because I’d kept my LUC at one hundred, fortune would surely favor us.

Rapping my knuckles against the stone, I confirmed the hollow’s location. Placing my hands on its edges, I pulled up the lid in one go.

“Wow,” Saito said. “You might look like a toothpick, but you’re surprisingly strong.”

“Oh, pipe down,” I grumbled. “That was just rude.”

“Look, there’s something in here,” Mitsurugi interjected.

She withdrew two first-ranked potions, both of which turned out to be surprisingly small. They were a little thicker than a pencil, around five centimeters long and cylindrical. If you snapped the small protrusion on the top, the mostly nonviscous contents would flow out smoothly.

“Holy cow,” Saito said. “Did we just hit the jackpot?”

“Indeed,” I replied. “You won’t find these while GTB hunting very often. After all, you’d have to shell out a million yen to buy a first-ranked potion.”

“Seriously?!”

I launched into an explanation. “These might be the lowest-ranked potions, but they can still mend simple fractures and ruptured tendons instantaneously. As long as the injuries aren’t too severe, these potions can also heal facial and bodily wounds without leaving a scar. Considering your jobs, you should both take these as good luck charms.”

“What?” Saito asked. “We can have them?”

“Of course. I present these trophies to the goddesses of good fortune. Later, I’ll fashion them into pendants so that you can wear them around.”

“Thank you so much!”

Afterwards, we found a few yen coins and a single rusted sword.

“Well then, shall we keep hunting for GTBs until noon?” I asked.

“A million yen, eh?” Saito said with a chuckle. “Wonder if we can find another ten.”

“If you could find potions so easily, everyone would hunt goblins.”

“I suppose so.”

And so, the three of us set out in search of another nest.

Morille, Yoyogi-Hachiman

“So, what happened in the end?” Miyoshi pressed.

“With the potions?” Saito asked. “We only found one more after that.”

Seated at the counter of Morille, the four of us were having dinner together. Per usual, the courses began with a mushroom bouillon. Afterwards, we were served multiple plates accented with cèpes, chanterelles, and girolles. Finally, the waiter brought out one last dish, which—on the surface—seemed completely ordinary. Nevertheless, I froze before it.

“D-Dearest Miyoshi,” I said, unconsciously turning formal. “Pray tell... What is this? Does it appear white to thine eyes?”

A thin, hide-like substance formed a pile of shavings on top of an egg. These shavings produced an aroma that I'd rarely ever experienced. Depending on one's olfactory senses, it could smell like gasoline.

"They're in season," Miyoshi replied. "And as you can see, all your guests are beautiful women, Kei."

"Liar!" I cried. "You just wanted to try one of these!"

"Now then, we need to choose our wine very care—"

"Don't ignore me when I'm talking!"

Listening to this exchange, Mitsurugi laughed. "I've heard that a Piedmont Barolo pairs well with white truffles. They're both produced in the same area."

"Forget everything you've heard," Miyoshi replied. "That's a ginormous lie. Restaurants just want to sell you expensive wine."

"Hey, everyone has their own tastes," I said. "Don't shoot down her suggestions."

"Well, seeing as it's *your* money, you can do whatever you like, but... I think we should choose a crisp, white wine with minerality. St. Joseph's Marsanne could be a unique choice."

"Sounds French."

"It's from the Rhône wine region," Miyoshi clarified. "Apparently, it pairs very well with white truffles. Let's try it next time."

"Um, no. Financially speaking, this is the last time we should eat truffles this year."

"Boo!"

Pressing her hands to her cheeks, Saito looked delighted. "This is my first time coming here, but it's all delicious!"

This girl truly had the makings of a universally beloved actress. Personality-wise.

"These shabby-looking mushrooms are absolutely scrumptious," she continued. "And they go so well with shrimp."

“Don’t insult them like that,” I chided. “But true, chanterelles aren’t much to look at.”

“Just like you, Yoshimura?”

“Kei’s not *that* gangly,” Miyoshi said.

“Do you two remember who today’s sponsor is?” I asked.

“You’re so wonderful!” Saito cheered.

“And ever so lovely!” Miyoshi agreed.

“Glad to hear it.”

As she watched this exchange, Mitsurugi smiled, pressing a glass of Alsace white—slightly sweet and oily—to her lips.

A few days later, I placed the three first-ranked potions in sturdy, acrylic cylinders. Next, I wrapped three-millimeter-thick deerskin strings around the tops of these pendants. And finally, I sent these “good luck charms,” which resembled slightly primitive accessories, to the three women. Each one contained the sentiment of a master praying for his apprentice’s well-being.

Miyoshi probably didn’t need one of these charms, but I’d still made one for her. Just in case.

Furthermore, as I should have anticipated, Saito stole the compound bows. Though she claimed to be “borrowing” them, I had no hopes of her ever returning the weapons. Thus, I also decided to give the bows to Saito and Mitsurugi as gifts.

What could I say? Saito reminded me of a little sneak thief named Gian.

November 26, 2018 (Monday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

After spending a delightful Sunday at Morille, a new week began. On Monday, I worked out a plan to help Miyoshi level up.

“The tenth level?” she asked.

“Yeah. At this point, you need to be able to protect yourself, but raising your

stats all at once is hard, right?”

Yes, we could fight together, but killing multiple monsters of the same species would always lead to a decrease in XP. These dungeons had quite the insidious leveling system. Even the Hound of Hecate—a “boss” monster—had only provided 1.02 points. With this in mind, the “Mitsurugi Method” would be far more effective. Of course, this technique could only work on Yoyogi’s unpopulated, slime-infested first level.

“That method *is* difficult,” Miyoshi agreed. “Still, if you’re as hardworking as Mitsurugi, you can reach the triple digit rankings in a month.”

“When I used Life Detection, she defeated three hundred slimes in a single day, netting six points. In thirty days, that would add up to 180 points. You could climb fairly high into the triple digits.”

Miyoshi shook her head. “There’s absolutely no way I’m killing that many slimes.”

She must have been imagining the cruel reality of dashing back to the dungeon entrance after each kill. By ascending to the triple digits, Mitsurugi had received numerous physical enhancements. Without those benefits, she probably wouldn’t have been capable of this feat. Suddenly forcing oneself to run that much would be excruciating.

“Well, in that case, you can kill slimes a little bit at a time,” I said.

“You’re still making me do it?!”

“Of course. You don’t want to die, right?”

“Ugh...”

Despite her milquetoast stats, Miyoshi still possessed Super Recovery, Water Magic, and Physical Resistance. These would make her relatively strong. However, if someone attempted to kill her, she was—on a fundamental level—just an average woman. Raising her stats even slightly to prevent her instantaneous death would be a good idea.

I pointed to the barghest and monoeye on a list of tenth-level monsters. “Putting that aside for now, we’re hunting these two monsters this time.”

“The monster you defeated the other day—the Hound of Hecate—is a kind of barghest, right?”

“Indeed. And I could obtain Darkness Magic VI from it.”

“Six?” Miyoshi repeated. “That’s an unregistered skill.”

“It’s probably used to summon hellhounds.”

“What?! To my knowledge, there have been zero reports of summoning magic!”

“You still find these things surprising?” I asked. “Either way, if you can summon hellhounds for protection, it won’t matter if you’re a little weak.”

“Maybe, but if I’m up against multiple people on Simon’s level, I won’t stand a chance.”

“Still, the summons would buy you enough time to escape.”

“I don’t think you have any evidence to support that,” Miyoshi said. “But anyway, why are you interested in this monoeye?”

“This monster will definitely drop an Appraisal orb, don’t you think?”

Along with magical item boxes, Appraisal was also a standard skill in otherworld stories.

Miyoshi seemed unenthusiastic. “Appraisal, huh...?”

In response, I tried pouring a little gasoline onto her fire. “With Appraisal, you’ll probably be able to verify statuses as numbers.”

“Seriously?! Kei, you have to get this orb for me, no matter what!”

“Um, you *are* coming with me, y’know? And yeah, I’ll get you the orb. If the monoeye drops it, that is.”

“What, I have to come too? Aren’t there a whole mess of monsters on the tenth level? Plus, I get the feeling it smells horrible there.”

Originally, the route to the eleventh level hadn’t been crawling with monsters. Yet once the assimilation drug had been discovered, ignoring the undead creatures had become the norm. By now, the route would be swarming with zombies, skeletons, and so forth.

“So, they’re like the infinitely spawning first-floor slimes?” Miyoshi asked.

“Pretty much. And apparently, undead monsters will approach humans.”

Miyoshi made a displeased face. “You sure we’ll be okay?”

Though quite a few women liked zombie movies, most of them probably despised actual zombies.

“From what I’ve heard, zombies and skeletons appear around the clock,” I said. “That being the case, I can use them to increase my kill count. During the afternoon, I’ll hunt down a monoeye, and at night, I’ll hunt down a barghest.”

“Do you think Water Magic will work on all of them?”

“I have an INT of one hundred. So long as the magic isn’t rendered ineffective, I should be able to push through with brute force... At least, I think so.”

“What about me?” Miyoshi asked.

“If magic doesn’t work, you can always use the iron balls.”

“Roger that. In fact, the iron balls will probably be more effective against monsters like skeletons.”

“Yeah, just don’t run out of ammunition,” I advised.

At this, Miyoshi donned a bold smile, puffing out her chest. “Storage can easily accommodate twenty Fuso buses, right? Seeing as we figured out its insane capacity, I bought ten thousand balls from Funabe Seiko! That’s twenty tons of the eight-centimeter rounds!”

With Vault, I could store five hundred balls at most. I’d have to ask Miyoshi to share with me.

Miyoshi cackled. “Leave it to me. But we do have a small problem. According to the company, they can’t deliver the order all at once.”

“That’s a *huge* problem!”

“Well, um, they’re delivering a reasonable number of balls in the first shipment, so it should be okay. But if we don’t have enough ammunition, you could preemptively obtain Fire Magic from a lesser salamandra on the eleventh floor. Although I’m not actually sure if those monsters drop Fire Magic

orbs.”

“It seems like they would,” I said. “Well then, should we hurry up and go? I still have most of our supplies from the last trip.”

“Huh? Right now? That won’t work. We’re receiving an answer from the JDA today, remember?”

“Oh, right. By the way, I haven’t told the JDA that we have two of the language orbs.”

“You didn’t even tell Naruse?” Miyoshi asked.

“Nope.”

“When she finds out, she’s going to cry.”

I shrugged. “Sooner or later, plenty of Otherworldly Language Comprehension orbs will be floating around. The dungeons themselves seem to be plotting that. And so, we should rob the government blind while we still can. As Queen of the Merchants—”

“As Queen of the Merchants, that is my way,” Miyoshi concluded.

“Exactly.”

The two of us chuckled sinisterly. Lately, the Queen of the Merchants had been exerting a little too much influence over me. I needed to be careful about that.

Regaining control of myself, I cleared my throat. “After we’ve auctioned off one orb, we can give the other to Naruse,” I casually said. “Does that work?”

The two known users of Otherworldly Language Comprehension could end up claiming different things. To determine which translation was actually correct, I would leave this valuable third orb in Naruse’s possession. I would essentially be telling her, “The fate of the world is in your hands.” This situation would resemble two major political parties vying for supremacy. As the smaller third party stuck in the middle, I hoped Naruse would conduct herself well since her vote would be the tiebreaker.

“Honestly, that sounds more mean-spirited than valiant,” Miyoshi noted. “But during the second auction, she did earn the JDA two billion four hundred million

yen. She can deal with this much.”

Um, you know that's not Naruse's money, right?

As this thought occurred to me, the doorbell rang.

“Speak of the devil, eh?” Miyoshi said.

Checking the entryway's camera footage on the PC, Miyoshi unlocked the door. “Come on in, Naruse.”

Wearing a meek expression, Naruse entered the house, bowing her head. “I'm so sorry!” were the first words out of her mouth.

“Hold on there,” I said. “Even if you apologize right off the bat, I have no idea what's going on...”

Lifting her head, Naruse still wore a very apologetic expression. She then began to speak, each word sounding more difficult to utter. “As it stands, even if you obtain the language orb, we don't have the budget to buy it from you.”

That surprised me quite a bit. I hadn't expected the JDA to discard their chance of acquiring the orb. Rather, I'd expected them to estimate the lowest possible price, haggling down from there. Yet now, the JDA had completely abandoned Japan's national interest. Had our country's elites even been made privy to this discussion?

“That's...quite the bold decision,” I said. “I can't imagine the government, the SDF, and the Public Safety Bureau leaders sharing that opinion.”

Naruse fidgeted, as if she were still having trouble speaking. Was there more to this story?

“Did you hear anything else?” I asked. “Since these aren't your opinions, don't hesitate to repeat them.”

Her expression changing to one of resignation, Naruse began speaking. “Well then, here's what they said. If you two are loyal Japanese citizens, you should give the orb to the state free of charge.”

Hot damn! The most clichéd statement to rock the very foundations of

capitalism! Yep, I expected this one sooner or later!

“Who said something *that* stupid?” I asked.

“The one to actually make this statement was Executive Director Mizuho,” Naruse answered.

That old man who tried to pressure us into selling our orb preservation technology for ten million yen? Why was someone of his station participating in this unresolved, world-shaking issue?

“How does that idiot know anything about this?” Miyoshi asked.

Wow, she doesn't mince words. But yeah, he is an idiot.

“After Saiga brought this news to his superiors, the Dungeon Agency and Ministry of Finance gathered at the JDA,” Naruse explained. “Apparently, a meeting of bureau directors took place with Mizuho in attendance.”

“Bureau directors?” I repeated. “At the very least, wouldn't the parliamentary vice ministers have gotten involved in this sort of governmental side story? How did this stay at the level of bureau directors?”

“From what I've heard, Mizuho spoke to his acquaintances, giving them the green light to hold the meeting.”

Seriously? I might have called him an idiot, but did he actually lack that much awareness? Hard to believe he became an executive director.

“So,” I said. “When Mizuho put on a good show at the meeting, the other agencies and ministries decided to join him?”

“I believe so,” Naruse replied.

I have to ask, Japan—is it okay for mere bureau directors to make this kind of decision? The Public Safety Bureau wasn't even involved. I'll have to tell Secret Agent Tanaka about this later.

“I think I've got a good handle on the situation,” I said. “And though we wanted Japan to buy this orb, our country has left us with no choice. Miyoshi.”

“Yes?” she asked.

“Let's put the orb up for auction.”

“Huh? You think that’s a good idea?”

I nodded. “Since that meeting was held without the slightest bit of caution, the details have probably leaked out already. I wouldn’t be surprised if multiple organizations are surveilling us right now. With the power balance of the world being at stake, I can’t believe this is how Japan handled things.”

“I’m sorry,” Naruse apologized.

“No, it’s not your fault. Still, I should ask this. The purpose of that meeting was to determine Japan’s next course of action once we brought the orb back to the surface, correct?”

“That’s right. But don’t tell me you’ve already...”

I placed a finger to my lips, stopping her from completing that sentence.

“Miyoshi,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Once we start the auction, we’ll lay low until the bidding ends.”

I wouldn’t be able to stand various organizations—both moderate and hard-line—approaching us around the clock. Though we had many enemies, there were only two of us. Eventually, we would grow sick and tired of the situation, while some countries excelled at wearing down their opponents.

“Really?!” Miyoshi cried. “Sounds like things are heating up!”

I shook my head. “The way you react to things like this is actually a huge relief.”

But if we go on a trip, we’d probably just be followed. And if we’re discovered, I don’t think we could escape...

“We’re probably safest inside a dungeon,” I said.

“In that case, we can also put the plan we discussed earlier into action,” Miyoshi added.

Pilfering Appraisal and strengthening Miyoshi, eh?

“Sounds good,” I agreed.

At this, Naruse spoke up in a worried voice. “Um... If you two go dungeon diving now, won’t people suspect you of trying to obtain the orb?”

“And because of that, countries not in possession of the orb won’t be able to harm us,” I pointed out. “Not until they confirm where we’re going, at least.”

This would serve as one sort of deterrent. Unfortunately, the same couldn’t be said of Russia—the only other country in possession of the orb. However, because none of their top explorers had come to Japan, I hoped that any Russians inside the dungeon would be second-rate.

“Naruse,” I said. “If you want to quit the JDA after this, feel free to join me.”

“Huh? Are you p-p-proposing to me?!”

“...No, I’m not.”

Miyoshi snorted. “You might as well kiss her, Kei.”

Ignoring her mockery, I continued. “Once your business with Midori is up and running, you plan on creating a corporation, right?”

“Yep,” Miyoshi answered. “I don’t want to pay dungeon taxes on this venture, after all.”

“And when that happens, you’ll need trustworthy staff members.”

“That’s true. Now that I think about it, you’d be perfect for the job, Naruse. I mean, you *are* Midori’s older sister. And since we have plenty of capital, we’ll pay you quite well.”

“But only once the business is up and running,” I clarified.

“And I have full faith in its success,” Miyoshi said.

Naruse nodded. “Right. I’ll keep that in mind for now.”

Using her answer as a cue, I clapped my hands together, speaking to Miyoshi. “All right! Let’s kick this auction off on Thanksgiving Day. It’ll be a gift from D-Powers to the world.”

“Uh, what?”

“What’s wrong? We’re just in time for Thanksgiving, right?”

In America, Thanksgiving always fell on the fourth Thursday of November.

“Umm, Yoshimura,” Naruse said, seeming hesitant to speak. “The first day of this month was a Thursday, so...”

No, don't tell me...!

“Kei, the fourth Thursday was *last* week,” Miyoshi finished.

“Egad!” I cried in English. “Quick, someone pardon a turkey!”

Miyoshi sighed. “Even if you pretend to be an American, Thanksgiving is long gone.”

How typical of me—a Japanese person—to get the date of Thanksgiving wrong!

“Damn!” I swore. “Well then, the twenty-eighth is...the day on which Mauritania gained its independence from France!”

“That has nothing to do with America,” Miyoshi said.

“In that case, it's the anniversary of *Rawhide*'s first broadcast! [\(5\)](#) That's super American! Especially if you've watched *The Blues Brothers*!”

“Okay, okay, whatever you want. But basically, the auction will start on the twenty-eighth, right?”

We would need at least one day to build publicity.

“I'll spend all of today spreading the word,” Miyoshi continued. “But just so you know...”

“What is it?” I asked.

“The twenty-eighth is actually a Wednesday,” Miyoshi finished with a giggle.

“I've had enough of this...”

As a result, this auction would no longer have anything to do with Thanksgiving. But since we were already a week late, what did it matter?

“So, once we've made the announcement...” I trailed off.

“We'll flee to Yoyogi Dungeon,” Miyoshi finished. “Do you mind if I make a few extravagant purchases in preparation?”

“Use as much money as you’d like.”

“Now that sort of line will *definitely* help you find a girlfriend.”

I grimaced. “Yeah, not the type of girl I want to attract.”

But apparently, dropping fat stacks of cash to wine and dine the girls at a hostess bar could be fun. Not that I’d ever been to one of those places.

“Until the auction ends, we can avoid complications by hiding in the dungeon,” I said. “But we’ll be in most danger—”

“The day before the auction ends,” Miyoshi concluded. “And on our way to deliver the orb.”

I nodded in agreement. During the delivery, we would definitely be in possession of the orb. If our enemies wanted to rob us or render us incapable of making the delivery, that would be the perfect time to strike.

“Well, city chase scenes are the best parts of action movies,” I said.

In response to our overexcitement, a nervous-looking Naruse quipped at us from the sidelines. “Um, that means Tokyo will turn into a battlefield of soldiers vying for the orb. I’m begging you—please be careful.”

November 27, 2018 (Tuesday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman

After Miyoshi published the site, dropping bread crumbs of information across the web, the world responded surprisingly quickly. Though we hadn’t publicized D-Powers’ office number, our phone began ringing nonstop. In the end, we dealt with this by pulling out the phone line.

Then I called Tanaka, giving him the rough details of the meeting held at the JDA. “Since Japan has abandoned their rights to buy the orb, we’re putting it up for auction,” I reported.

This was the first time Tanaka’s phone number had proven useful.

“Y-You can’t be serious...” Tanaka replied.

“Well, that’s just the way the cookie crumbles. I leave the rest to you.”

I could hear Tanaka panicking on the other end of the receiver. However, since he'd banned us from traveling, I considered this fair retribution.

"H-Hold on a second here," Tanaka pleaded. "Why have things come to this?"

"Try asking the ministries and agencies I mentioned earlier," I suggested. "Oh, and you should probably investigate any foreigners entering the country after the twenty-sixth. Once the auction concludes, the roads leading to the trade site could become a war zone."

With this final threat, I ended the call. I then powered off my cell phone and tossed it into Vault.

Washington, DC, United States of America

News of the auction traveled around the world in the blink of an eye, stirring up controversy among the dungeon research institutes of various countries. At the United States Dungeon Department's request, Aaron Ainsworth—director of a dungeon laboratory in Nevada—had flown to Washington, DC.

The USDD was the American government's newest department. Following Homeland Security, it was the sixteenth one. Due to being established in an emergency, the USDD currently borrowed one section of the Department of the Interior's headquarters.

"Dungeons *are* a resource," Aaron muttered to himself.

The car took the narrow access road from George Washington Memorial Parkway onto Interstate 395, crossing the bridge over the Potomac River. The bank examiner for whom this bridge was named had sacrificed himself to save two women. In return, he'd merely had a bridge rechristened in his honor, stealing the former name from a French count. [\(6\)](#)

The entire world stood at a perilous boundary. Though Aaron understood this better than anyone, he had no intention of becoming a shield for humanity. Especially if this required laying down his own life.

Entering 12th Street, the car finally approached Smithsonian Station. Due to the grade-separated roads, light and darkness bathed the vehicle in turns. The

contrast reminded Aaron of angelic and demonic forces waging war during Armageddon. Finally, in the last pool of light, a straight road appeared, with the high walls of two museums framing it on either side.

The clash between the uphill slope and the gradually lowering walls produced a strange optical illusion. “You have nowhere left to run,” it seemed to be warning him. Fleeing from this uncanny illusion, the car took a sharp left. On his left-hand side, Aaron could now see the Washington Memorial, and in the distance, he could begin to make out the White House on his right.

This place is the center of politics and government. Yet when everything we know about the world is rewritten, it could become the most remote of regions.

Just ahead of Aaron, the flags of the Second Division Memorial fluttered at half-mast. Perhaps America needed that flaming sword—representing the defense of Paris against the German advancement—once more.

I’m growing too sentimental, Aaron chided himself, shaking his head.

From US-50, his car entered 18th Street Northwest. Finally, a square, pinkish building came into view on his left side.

This was his final stop.

“So, who the hell put this orb up for auction?”

Without much of a greeting, Curtis Peter Hathaway—first chief secretary of the USDD—posed this question.

In response, Aaron gave a straightforward, emotionless report. “Someone with a JDA license code.”

“The JDA? Either way, I’ve never heard of a skill orb auction. Has such a thing become possible? I haven’t received any reports on the matter.”

“As far as I know, it is possible. If you find the orb within twenty-four hours, gather bidders within twenty-four hours, declare a winner within twenty-four hours, set up a trade within twenty-four hours, hand over the item in twenty-four hours, and allow the recipient to use it. Within twenty-four hours, of course.”

Stifling his anger, Curtis pressed the butt of his pen against the desktop several times. “Yes, I’m aware of that,” his demeanor seemed to say.

“According to the website, the auction will begin on November 28th at 12:00 a.m. Eastern Time,” Curtis actually said. “And supposedly, the bidding will last two days.”

“If the auctioneers ‘coincidentally’ find the orb on the winner’s designated pickup date, it might be possible.”

“In other words, it’s impossible.”

Rather than answering, Aaron simply shrugged.

“Allow me to change the question,” Curtis said. “Could our country hold a similar auction?”

“No, we couldn’t,” Aaron answered immediately.

“Then give me your report and personal thoughts on the findings.”

After handing over the report he’d compiled, Aaron began explaining the situation. Lieutenant Gershwin had already purchased two orbs from the website, and according to reliable reports, his team had actually received them. Thus, the auctioneers weren’t committing fraud.

Though Gershwin didn’t know the precise method, the seller claimed to have obtained the orbs by “coincidence.” In fact, two previously unregistered skills had been sold on the site.

“Based on this information, the site runners must possess special technology for preserving, finding, or acquiring orbs. Or else—” Here, Aaron paused for a moment, wondering if he should continue. In the end, he added, “This might sound foolish, but perhaps they simply have God’s favor.”

Curtis grimaced ever so slightly, not responding to this.

Stories of an Indian billionaire meeting a sorcerer in Japan had also originated in the EU. However, Aaron hadn’t included these in his report. After all, these tales had probably taken on a life of their own within high society circles.

“If that technology actually exists, could we pressure Japan into giving it to us?” Curtis asked.

“If you don’t mind, direct those questions to the White House or State Department,” Aaron replied. “But in my opinion...”

“Yes?”

“Even after two auctions, the Japanese government hasn’t made a move. Quite possibly, the higher-ups aren’t involved in this.” While Curtis appeared to think this over, Aaron continued speaking. “So, what do you think we should do?”

“In regard to what?” Curtis asked.

“Otherworldly Language Comprehension is absolutely vital to maintaining the world’s power balance. Currently, Russia is the only country capable of deciphering the inscriptions, remember?”

“And we don’t even know if the published translations are accurate,” Curtis agreed. “In fact, only Russia knows the truth. Is that what you mean to say?”

Aaron nodded. “That’s right.”

“If possible, I’m in favor of the US winning the auction. What’s the estimated price?”

“There’s no estimate listed on the site.”

“None at all?”

“Indeed,” Aaron confirmed. “Considering the national budgets of countries in need of this orb, we’ll need to spend a billion dollars at minimum.”

Curtis’s eyes widened. “That much?”

“Russia will want to preserve its own rights and interests. And if the US and the EU begin competing with each other to thwart Russia, I wouldn’t be surprised if the bidding reaches over ten billion dollars.”

“Essentially,” Curtis began, “if we can maintain the world’s power balance with 1.4 percent of our national defense budget, you think that’s a small price to pay?”

“If the price of two aircraft carriers can restore order to the world, indeed I do.”

A clock hung on the wall, its second hand continuing to move smoothly and soundlessly.

After a short pause, Curtis broke the silence. “In summation, kidnapping the site owners and forcing them to cooperate with us seems like the easiest solution.”

In response to this alarming statement, Aaron couldn’t hide his true feelings. “Do...you think society would allow that?”

“Out on the front lines, where nations are battling for their own interests, laws and ethics don’t mean a damn thing. Only power matters. So long as the people remain in the dark, God’s in His heaven, and all’s right with the world.”

Aaron listened to these words with an expression devoid of emotion. He couldn’t do anything else.

Seeming to judge Aaron’s reaction as unfavorable, Curtis switched to a jocular tone. “But of course, as the guardians of democracy, we could never do such a thing.”

Though Curtis seemed pleased with his “skillful” evasion, Aaron could sense that his true feelings were completely different. Nevertheless, he would never say anything to trap his boss in a corner. Not if he wanted to succeed in this world.

“Speaking of Lieutenant Gershwin, why hasn’t he joined the USDD?” Curtis asked.

The Dungeon Strike Force had been created prior to the USDD and reported directly to the president. Of course, many of its staff members had been selected from the Pentagon. However, other members had come from the DEA and FBI, both of which were under the Department of Justice’s jurisdiction.

Conversely, the USDD—which mostly treated dungeons as a resource—had only been established last year. Because of this, the department lacked active units. Likewise, the USDD hadn’t been granted any authority over the DSF. As such, each remained separate organizations for the time being.

“Because the government wishes to keep dungeon management and capturing separate,” Aaron answered.

“Is Gershwin still in Japan?”

“Ostensibly, he and his team are on vacation after capturing Evans Dungeon. Regardless, he’s met with the aforementioned auctioneer, and his team is currently diving in Yoyogi.”

“Yoyogi is a veritable gold mine. Japan certainly is magnanimous, allowing other countries to extract its resources to their hearts’ content.” Here, Curtis donned a contemptuous smile, but his features soon stiffened once more. “I sincerely doubt this is the case, but...”

“Yes?” Aaron asked.

“Could Team Simon be selling whatever orbs they acquire to these auctioneers?”

“How could you even think that?” Aaron began to say but swallowed his words. It wasn’t impossible, and the DSF members were more than a little eccentric.

Even so, I doubt they could fool a WDA management organization.

“If you’re worried, why not let one of the military’s internal audit teams investigate?” Aaron suggested.

“I’d rather not be indebted to the Pentagon.” At this, Curtis chuckled. “It’s about time we got our own units up and running, don’t you think?”

Curtis’s expression looked sinister. Almost like that of a lizard.

“I’ll have a bureau of the USDD place the bid,” Curtis finished. “You are relieved of your duties in the matter.”

“Understood.”

Nodding respectfully, Aaron left the room.

2-3-1 Nagatacho, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo, Prime Minister’s Official Residence

On the day King Abdullah of Jordan visited Japan, a migratory anticyclone covered Tokyo, causing unseasonably warm weather. When the sun had begun

to set ever so slightly, Director of Cabinet Intelligence Murakita and Chief of Staff, Joint Staff Noga visited the official residence of Prime Minister Ibe.

“Japan forfeited the right to purchase Otherworldly Language Comprehension?!” Ibe cried.

“That seems to be the case,” Noga responded with a gloomy expression.

“What an unpleasant surprise. When and where did this happen? And who the hell made this decision?”

This morning, the directors of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ North American Affairs Bureau and the Ministry of Defense’s Defense Policy Bureau had visited the prime minister. According to them, the US had inquired after the language orb, which had suddenly been put up for auction. Ibe never would have imagined Japan forfeiting the right to buy the orb.

Since Russia’s initial announcement of Otherworldly Language Comprehension, communications surrounding the orb had passed from America to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Dungeon Agency. The importance of this skill orb in matters of foreign diplomacy should have been clear to everyone. Of all places, another copy of this orb might come from Yoyogi, and Japan had forfeited their right to purchase it?

According to a detailed explanation from Murakita—who had delivered the original report—the orb would go up for auction at 12:00 a.m. Eastern Time on the twenty-eighth.

“Why was such an important meeting held at the JDA—in secret, no less—without our knowledge?” Ibe asked.

“Apparently, the executive director gave the go-ahead,” Murakita replied. “He’s a former bureaucrat.”

Once it went up for sale, countless people would clamor to buy Otherworldly Language Comprehension. There had already been much debate around whether the JDA could be classified as a for-profit company. If they *weren’t* a nonprofit associated with the government, forfeiting the right to purchase the orb was unthinkable.

“Based on Tanaka’s investigation, the vice director of the Budget Bureau

complained of insufficient funds,” Murakita explained. “In response to this, someone else boldly proclaimed that the auctioneers should offer up the orb for free or for a low cost. Apparently, the Ministry of Finance also decided to hop aboard this bandwagon, so long as it didn’t strain the budget.”

“Offer up the orb for free?” Ibe repeated. “Do these explorers have relatives in the JDA or something?”

“No. From what I’ve heard, they were told, ‘If you’re loyal Japanese citizens, presenting this orb to your country should be a matter of course.’ Well, that’s the gist of it, anyway.”

Ibe laughed. “These days, you wouldn’t even say that to Ministry of Defense personnel. Unlawfully forcing explorers to offer up their wealth for a low cost? Is the JDA a dictatorship or something?”

Exasperated, Noga also laughed humorlessly. Perhaps the situation would have differed in wartime, but the state existed to protect the people, not the other way around. After all, citizens were the ones paying taxes.

“And so?” Ibe asked.

“Based on Tanaka’s questioning of D-Powers, the JDA requested their services in finding Otherworldly Language Comprehension,” Murakita continued. “Now, because the JDA can’t pay for the orb, they won’t accept the trade. Furthermore, being told, ‘If you love your country, you’ll give us the orb,’ only encouraged D-Powers to put it up for auction.”

How dreadful, Ibe thought. But if the JDA forced their hand, perhaps there’s still room for negotiation.

“The auction begins at 12:00 a.m. Eastern Time on the twenty-eighth,” the prime minister said. “In Japanese Standard Time, that would be—”

“2:00 p.m. on the twenty-eighth,” Murakita finished.

“If possible, I’d like to stop the auction before then and purchase the orb. If the revised budget isn’t ready on time, we can use the settlement adjustment fund system. During the 1970 Oil Crisis, Japan withdrew two trillion and five hundred billion yen from there. Withdrawing another trillion should be possible.”

“Since then, there haven’t been any transfers into the fund,” Murakita reminded Ibe. “Its current balance is zero.”

The prime minister nodded. “We can temporarily transfer money from the national debt consolidation fund. Let’s hope D-Powers gives us a slight discount.”

“But what about the Diet’s approval?”

“We can get the Diet’s formal approval later. For now, I’ll have some of its members lay the groundwork, but we’re currently on a twenty-two-hour time limit.”

Later today, Ibe would have a meeting with King Abdullah. And the day after tomorrow, he would have to go to Argentina for the G20 summit.

“Murakita,” Ibe said. “Come back to my home at 6:45 p.m. tomorrow to deliver a report on the outcome of this situation.”

“Understood, sir.”

If this comes to light, the opposition party will cause yet another uproar... But if we fail, I’ll have an even bigger price to pay.

While Murakita whispered something into Noga’s ear, the two men left the prime minister’s residence.

Moscow, Russia, Central Administrative Okrug

Russia’s dungeon exploration organization—the Dungeon Capturing Directorate—hadn’t been created under the nation’s Ministry of Defense or The Federal Security Service. Instead, it had been created under The Main Directorate of Special Programs of the President, otherwise known as GUSP. Nevertheless, the acting minister of GUSP did not control the DCD. Instead, the general director of the DCD reported directly to the president.

Incidentally, agents of The Directorate of Special Facilities Attached to the President, which also belonged to GUSP, were called “moles.” In similar fashion, agents of the Dungeon Capturing Directorate were called “weasels.”

From Red Square, the GUM department store and the tourist attraction of

Sredniye Torgovyye Ryady—which translated to the peculiar name of ‘Middle Trading Rows’—flanked either side of a street named Ulitsa Il’inka. A little way down this road, the DCD headquarters stood next to the Presidential Administration offices.

“In other words, D-Powers still hasn’t obtained the orb?”

Inside the main office, a man simply called “The Director” sat behind his desk. Appearing to be in his forties, he had razor-sharp eyes, a slender yet toned physique, and wore his hair in an undercut.

“Most likely.”

In response to The Director’s question, a directorate member named Kurnikov provided an answer. Appearing to be in his thirties, Kurnikov—a large man with a stout build—stood at attention.

“Unlike the first two times, the sellers aren’t allowing an extension following the auction’s conclusion,” Kurnikov continued. “Instead, they’ll deliver the orb to the winning bidder on December second.”

“So for some reason, they don’t want to deal with endless extensions.”

If the auction had no set time limit, the bidding might continue interminably. In this scenario, no one would be able to predict when the final bid would occur. However, the situation surrounding this particular orb was incredibly unique. As such, D-Powers wouldn’t use the conventional extension method.

“Most likely,” Kurnikov confirmed.

“In that case, they can probably only obtain the orb—or have the possibility of obtaining it—on December second.”

A thought crossed Kurnikov’s mind. *If D-Powers truly obtains this orb, and it passes into the possession of a country other than Russia, our nation will lose its advantage in the field of dungeon development.*

Due to uncontrollable circumstances, a man named Ignat Severni had been forced to use Otherworldly Language Comprehension. Ignat was an uneducated explorer with a background in mining. Yes, the orb allowed one to understand the otherworldly script, but to translate that language, Ignat had required the

intelligence to depict those concepts in Russian. Thus, he'd needed instruction from the ground up on how to translate the inscriptions correctly. The process hadn't been very effective.

"Should we send personnel to obstruct D-Powers?" Kurnikov asked, peering at The Director to gauge his reaction.

In response, The Director turned a frigid glare on him. "I'll dispatch personnel to *support* D-Powers," he said quietly. "Undoubtedly, Yoyogi will be far more dangerous than usual on that day. To ensure that they return to the surface safely, D-Powers will need guards watching over them, don't you think?"

"Well then, I'll send a team from the Dungeon Capturing Directorate to—"

"Please dispatch one group from Directorate 'V' of the Federal Security Service."

"What?"

During the KGB era, Directorate "V" had been a unit called Vympel. At the time, they had ostensibly protected nuclear power facilities. Yet in reality, they had been an elite unit specializing in both espionage and sabotage.

After many ups and downs, two elite units that had supported the KGB's illegal activities continued to exist as the "A" and "V" Directorates. These directorates were located within the Political Extremism Countermeasures Directorate of the Special Missions Center. Furthermore, both were under the FSB's jurisdiction.

"Think of this as something of an insurance policy," The Director said.

Due to the shadows, Kurnikov couldn't see The Director's features very well, but his lips appeared to twist into a smile.

"I see, sir..."

"Imagine D-Powers *does* return to the surface safely. Even if they do, there's no guarantee they'll arrive at the trade location, right? After all, some accidents are unavoidable, no matter how careful you are."

"...You want this to happen in the middle of Tokyo?" Kurnikov asked.

The Director nodded. "No matter how safe Japan might be, accidents still

happen there.”

“True, but...”

“If such an accident happened to occur on that day, it wouldn’t be the least bit strange.”

“Understood.”

Having said this, Kurnikov left The Director’s office to take care of the formalities.

“That still might not be enough,” The Director muttered to himself.

Picking up his office phone, he input a number connecting him to the Foreign Intelligence Service.

Yoyogi Dungeon

We told Naruse where to find us if necessary, finished our preparations quickly, and dove into Yoyogi. While avoiding all other explorers and monsters, we raced down the shortest possible route to our destination. Life Detection proved incredibly useful during this excursion. We had placed everything important into Miyoshi’s Storage and my Vault. Fortunately, we still had plenty of supplies left since we hadn’t exhausted everything from last time.

After learning my lesson on the previous dive, I remembered to bring cloaks to hide our beginner’s equipment. When I put on the garment, its warmth surprised me. Though I’d thought of cloaks as nothing more than props to flutter in the wind, they actually provided utility.

“Kei, I’m glimpsing people in the back camera every so often,” Miyoshi said. “Is anyone following us?”

“Hold on a second.”

By using Life Detection, we were traveling down a different route from normal. Yet when I inspected our surroundings carefully, four groups were tailing us. None of these groups appeared to be working together, their actions disparate. Nevertheless, they all seemed quite skilled, maintaining a reasonable distance while still shadowing us.

“Yeah, I’m detecting people,” I confirmed. “There seem to be four groups, no less.”

“The four groups gathered in Yoyogi would be America, China, Great Britain, and...Japan, maybe?”

“What about Russia?”

“Doubt it,” Miyoshi replied. “We just announced the auction yesterday, and unlike the other countries, Russia won’t have any interest in where we’re going. They’ll take center stage on December second.”

In that case, these groups probably wouldn’t harm us for the time being. Conversely, they might even protect us. Still, we couldn’t let our guards down.

“Doesn’t seem like Simon and his friends are here, though,” I said.

All of Team Simon had climbed to the single digit rankings. Perhaps because of this, the “power” I felt from them when using Life Detection was extraordinary. Since I’d tested this skill on Team Simon several times, I wouldn’t mistake these other explorers for them.

“None of these groups are nearly as impressive,” I added.

“They must be scouting units. Organizations with that kind of money and manpower are on a completely different level than ours.” Her voice tinged with jealousy, Miyoshi suddenly smiled, as if she’d thought of something mischievous. “If we go down a narrow, one-way road, the teams will all bump into each other. That would be pretty funny, right?”

“They’d probably just act clueless, as if they’d run into each other by chance.”

“You don’t think they’d try diversionary tactics on each other?”

“Diversionary tactics...?” I repeated. “Well, they can’t kill each other, and they can’t lose sight of us either.”

Still, allowing these teams to follow us at their leisure felt uncomfortable. Like being under surveillance.

No, we are under surveillance.

After turning a corner, I marked our pursuers with Life Detection. I then

picked up Miyoshi, relying on my stats to increase my speed.

Miyoshi yelled in surprise. “A-Are you trying to throw them off our trail?”

“I don’t know if I can throw them off completely, but at the very least, I want to confirm that they’re following us.”

Even after the groups had left our field of vision, they still seemed to be tailing us. Perhaps they had some kind of special scouting technology that could track our footprints or something.

“Maybe they have something like a human detection radar,” Miyoshi said. “There aren’t many people in a place this remote, after all.”

“Are there human detection radars small enough to carry around?”

“Fifteen years ago, an MIT researcher created a device that uses Wi-Fi signals to detect objects in motion and nothing else. I wouldn’t be surprised if that had been further developed to combat terrorism.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

“That concludes my latest report on D-Powers.”

Miharu Naruse delivered a report to Section Chief Saiga in a small conference room of the JDA. She detailed the recent activities of D-Powers and how she had supported them.

“I must say, you’ve done great work,” Saiga replied. “Since you’ve become involved with D-Powers, their party has netted the JDA two billion four hundred and seventy million yen in commission alone. You’ve made quite the name for yourself as a businesswoman. If things had gone poorly, those earnings could have been off by three orders of magnitude.”

That had nothing to do with my own abilities, Naruse thought. Regardless, she didn’t comment on the matter. Results were results, whether obtained through luck or one’s actual abilities. That’s how jobs worked in the adult world.

With a slap, Saiga closed the report in his hands. Relaxing, he then folded his

legs as if to make small talk. “Even after claiming their orbs, China’s Huang and England’s William are still in Japan, correct?”

“What?” Naruse asked. “They still haven’t returned to their own countries?”

“Far from returning home, Huang’s and William’s entire teams arrived in Japan over the past few days.”

“Really?”

“Essentially, they’re asking us to ‘lend’ them Yoyogi for a while,” Saiga explained.

“Don’t their respective countries have partially captured dungeons as well?”

“Of course.”

That being said, China had very few dungeons. For some reason, the areas behind Japan—if viewed from the Pacific Ocean—had a low distribution of dungeons.

Miharu frowned. “Then why is everyone abandoning those dungeons to gather in Yoyogi?”

“You have to ask? Because of the auction, of course.”

Otherworldly Language Comprehension. The auction for this orb would be held in Japan, and the trade would take place in Ichigaya. Naturally, the orb itself would come from Yoyogi Dungeon.

“Furthermore, France’s Victor and Germany’s Edgar have requested that their entire support teams be allowed to join them,” Saiga continued. “Apparently, even America is sending over more explorers.”

“Would that be a support team for Simon’s party?” Miharu asked.

“No. From what I’ve heard, these will be members of the USDD.”

“The United States Dungeon Department?”

“Indeed.”

Simon belonged to the Dungeon Strike Force. Having been created first, this organization reported directly to the president. Its staff had been selected from the Pentagon as well as the DEA and FBI, both of which were under the

Department of Justice's jurisdiction.

Conversely, the USDD—which mostly treated dungeons as a resource—had been created last year. And because the USDD hadn't been granted authority over the DSF, the former had active units independent to their department. In short, two dungeon capturing organizations with differing chains of command existed in America.

"Is there discord between the USDD and the DSF?" Miharu asked.

"Who knows? That's none of our concern, and I have no intention of sticking my neck into America's internal affairs." At this, Saiga stretched out his arms. "Well, that's the long and short of it. The world situation surrounding Yoyogi is about to get a lot more turbulent."

"Yoyogi Dungeon's lodging facilities don't have that sort of capacity, you know."

"I've already relayed that information. Thankfully, there are a lot of hotels around Shinjuku. The embassies of these various countries will probably find suitable accommodations."

"Except for Russia's Dimitri and Italy's Ettore, will the world's top twenty explorers be gathered in a single dungeon?"

Saiga leaned back against his chair, causing it to squeak. "Yes. Three years ago, the dungeons spread across the world, and nations scrambled to reestablish order. During that time, so many of the top explorers haven't gathered in one place until now."

"Kiryas Kul'yegan Dungeon is closed, after all."

Otherworldly Language Comprehension had first been found in Kiryas Kul'yegan. But due to its closure, the world's top explorers hadn't flocked there.

"That's true," Saiga agreed. "Still, dungeons completely open to the public like Yoyogi are far rarer. Speaking of which, did D-Powers enter Yoyogi today?"

"Yes," Miharu answered. "Apparently, they're going to horse around in there and then return once the auction has ended."

"Based on the timing of their dungeon dive, most people would assume

they're going to *retrieve* the orb, right?"

"I suppose so."

"Looking at the dungeon entry list, scouting teams from various countries are shadowing them. If Russia joins the fray, I wouldn't put assassination past them."

If that was a joke, it wasn't funny, Miharu thought.

"I don't know what D-Powers is thinking," Saiga continued, "but this time, they've designated December second as the handoff day. Pinning down their location on December first will be the top priority of all intelligence agencies across the world."

Since Yoyogi was a massive dungeon with a rich variety of monsters, an exhaustive search for a single orb would require considerable effort. However, narrowing the search down to the floor or area where D-Powers was hunting could dramatically reduce that effort.

"After D-Powers entered the dungeon, even the Security Bureau lost sight of them," Saiga admitted. "They came here asking questions."

"What? D-Powers is under the Security Bureau's surveillance?"

"No, they're under the Security Bureau's *protection*. Even the JDA has you watching over them."

This was news to Miharu. She couldn't help but feel surprised.

"I don't think I'd be very useful as a guard," she said.

Saiga laughed. "Just having a pair of eyes on them makes a world of difference. Either way, even the Security Bureau—which has staff located in a number of dungeon bases—wound up in this sorry state. It's very likely that the scouting teams from various countries lost sight of D-Powers as well. Everyone in the field must be in a huge panic right now." Here, Saiga's mouth twisted in amusement. "So, do you know where to locate D-Powers if necessary?"

For a moment, Miharu hesitated, but she decided to give an honest answer. "In case of an emergency, probably."

"Very good."

The days were steadily growing shorter. Outside the window, the late autumn sun had begun to paint the sky in shades of red.

Eighth Level, Yoyogi Dungeon

After shaking off our pursuers, we arrived at the stairs leading to the ninth level. With empty moats and earthen walls surrounding the area, it certainly looked like a base. Of course, there weren't any inns, but I found the food stall amusing, as it resembled something out of fiction.

According to the man working the food stall, two teams worked a two-day rotation. Since quite a few explorers could reach the eighth level, selling food proved surprisingly lucrative.

"This is what explorers should eat, right?" the man asked, handing us grilled meat on a skewer.

"Is this orc meat?" I asked.

"Nope, just pork."

Although orcs did exist on the eighth floor, their meat didn't have a very high drop rate. And apparently, bringing it back to the surface proved far more profitable.

Still, one meat skewer cost a whopping one thousand yen. That must have been due to the location, I supposed. I handed the stall worker two one-thousand-yen bills, paying for Miyoshi's portion as well.

Other than using commercial licenses, fellow explorers had two methods for transactions: actual cash and direct payment through WDA cards. For the latter, money would be automatically withdrawn from a bank account connected to one's WDA card. However, transactions exceeding one hundred thousand yen were prohibited. Likewise, a tax and handling charge of one hundred yen would be withdrawn from the sender's account each time.

Since this amount wasn't too different from an ATM fee, people still found it convenient. On the other hand, these transactions were completely transparent, lacking anything resembling privacy.

Also, monetary exchanges occurring within a dungeon would be settled once you returned to the surface. We couldn't use the internet down here, after all.

"This might be overcooked, but it's still surprisingly good," Miyoshi rudely pointed out, stuffing her cheeks with the pork skewer. "It's all about the mood, I guess."

With late afternoon approaching, snack time was over. Our pursuers had apparently lost sight of us, falling outside of Life Detection's range. Returning the skewers and saying thanks, we headed towards the stairs leading to the ninth level.

"You're going even lower in that gear?" the stall worker asked, his expression exasperated.

Perhaps he'd seen our beginner's equipment through the gaps in our cloaks.

"B08. This is 18. I've arrived on the eighth level. Over."

"This is B08. The target just descended to the ninth level. Over."

"B08. You're joking, right? No matter how you slice it, that's way too fast. Over."

"I'm certain. They're a man and woman in beginner's equipment. The woman is undoubtedly our target—Azusa Miyoshi. Over."

Sitting in the shadows away from the food stall, the man who'd sold the skewers spoke through a pair of earphones.

"Roger that," the other man said. "I'll follow them as fast as I can. Also, I've spotted others in our line of work wandering around. Take care on your end as well. Over and out."

Standing, the man took out his earphones. "I can't believe they're a full level ahead of our scouting team..." While looking in the direction of the stairs D-Powers had just descended, he muttered these words to himself: "Who the hell *are* those two?"

Ninth Floor, Yoyogi Dungeon

We arrived on the ninth level, and rather than a jungle, it resembled a climax forest. Moreover, the area had a Japanese atmosphere. Large buna trees towered skywards with quite a lot of space between them.

Life Detection picked up a number of monsters, most likely boar and bear types. According to our files, even orcs and forest wolves appeared on this level. Right now, the last two digits of my “kill count” were sixty-six. For the next thirty-three kills, I could slay whatever monsters I wanted.

Everyone hates the tenth floor because of what happens at night, but spending the evening there might be fun.

While this thought occurred to me, we kept walking towards the stairs to the tenth level. During the journey, Miyoshi kept launching iron balls, researching various things all the while. Since Storage attacks didn’t drain MP, she could use them with reckless abandon. Plus, we had plenty of iron balls.

This floor had a fair number of people. So long as you avoided the colonial worms, the ogres and king boars were appealing prey. If you could defeat them, that is. Yet because of the crowds, the iron balls proved more convenient here than magic. Due to their appearance, we could even pretend that we were using slingshots.

At a glance, most of the other explorers seemed to be parties of four to six people. The vanguard would halt the monster. Then, the middle guard would use spears or hammers. Finally, the rear guard would use crossbows, compound bows, or guns. This appeared to be the most common battle formation.

“From what I’ve heard, the SDF forms a tight line with bunker shields,” Miyoshi said. “Then they simultaneously fire upon the enemy with small arms.”

“Do they use Type-89s?”

“According to rumor, Howa Machinery has brought in Type-19s.”

So, they’re testing new models inside dungeons? With there being a fair number of humanoid monsters, that seems possible.

While doing our best to avoid attention due to our beginner’s equipment, we reached the stairs leading down to the tenth level. Before long, the sun would begin to set.

A relatively decent base was located on the eighth level next to the ninth-level stairs. Because of this, most explorers who spent the night in Yoyogi Dungeon would gather there. In other words, there was no one around the tenth level stairs.

Thus, we descended the stairs to the tenth level, not caring about the upcoming sunset.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

“Section Chief,” a staff member said. “You have a call on outside line three.”

Saiga sighed. “And here I was thinking of going home early.”

“Well, that’s just the pits, isn’t it?”

Hearing this, Saiga wondered if he’d made a mistake in training his employees. Then he reconsidered the matter. So long as everyone upheld the boss-employee distinction when dealing with those on the outside, being close to one’s subordinates wasn’t a bad thing.

The staff member handed Saiga the phone.

“Yes, this is Saiga.”

The somewhat stiff tone of an SDF official answered him on the other end of the receiver.

“...Oh, Mr. Terasawa,” Saiga replied. “It’s been too long. Yes, yes. What? Right now?”

In response to these words, Saiga noticed the female staff member’s shoulders begin to shudder. Without making a sound, he smiled wryly. No one wanted a difficult job popping up at this hour.

“You don’t have much time? I see... Understood.” Saiga looked at the clock on the wall, finding the hour hand nearing six in the evening. “Does seven work for you? Mhm. Yes, I understand. Of course. Well then, I’ll see you later.”

When Saiga hung up the phone, the staff member spoke to him considerately. “If you’re going to meet with someone in a little while, shall I stay here?”

“Since I’m meeting him outside the office, you can go home. But thank you.”

“No, thank you,” replied the staff member, wearing an expression of relief.
“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Bowing her head, she began preparing to leave the office.

Third Avenue, Fifth District, Shinjuku

The cab entered Idai Street from Tomihisacho. Right before exiting onto the Shiba Shinjuku Oji Line, the car turned left at the street’s last intersection. A little farther down and on the right, the cab stopped before a building with pure white walls. The entrance had a straightforward, inconspicuous design.

If Saiga hadn’t been told of this bar beforehand, he would have hesitated to walk through the door—especially considering its dim lighting. Nevertheless, he pulled open the slightly heavy door to the establishment, which bore the name of an old cocktail. Spotting Terasawa at the far end of the counter, he raised his hand in greeting. Noticing this immediately, the bartender pulled back the seat next to Terasawa.

“Nice place,” Saiga noted. “Very relaxed.”

“It’s always empty during the early evening, which I appreciate,” Terasawa replied.

The counter seated ten. Perhaps because the bar had just opened, there were no other customers there or at the tables one level below.

Using the napkin offered to him, Saiga wrote down his order for a gin and tonic. “So, what did you want to discuss?” he asked to break the ice.

In all likelihood, Terasawa wanted to discuss Otherworldly Language Comprehension. Even so, he’d invited Saiga to a place completely unrelated to the JDA or the Ministry of Defense. As such, Saiga couldn’t predict what sort of conversation might arise.

“Why did you stand idly by and watch?” Terasawa asked.

A thought crossed Terasawa’s mind. *He might feign harmlessness, but if anyone could have obtained the orb first, it would have been this man—the*

section chief of the Dungeon Management Section.

Not too long ago, Terasawa had contacted Saiga on a whim, putting him up to the task of finding Otherworldly Language Comprehension. Merely half a month later, the unthinkable had occurred: the orb had gone up for auction. Terasawa could only describe this development as earth-shattering. Yet if D-Powers had been involved, Saiga *not* having a hand in this seemed highly unlikely.

“...And what do you mean by that?” Saiga asked.

Terasawa didn’t answer the question directly, clenching his fist on the table instead. “A man like you could have done a better job. To me, it seems as though you deliberately created this situation.”

In response to Terasawa’s overly direct statement, Saiga donned a crooked smile, sipping his gin and tonic. The scent of lime tickled his nostrils, reviving his weary mind.

“If you’re speaking of Otherworldly Language Comprehension, you think too highly of me.” Taking a larger gulp of his drink, Saiga continued with obvious insincerity. “As I’m sure you know, nations would do battle to claim that orb for themselves. What could a mere section chief do in such a situation? If something happens that calls for a report, I simply relay that information.”

Saiga pointed upwards, the gesture implying, “To my superiors, of course.”

“But you didn’t even contact me, and I’m the one who first made the request,” Terasawa pointed out. “That suggests some sort of intent to me.”

“Again, you think too highly of me. To my knowledge, the orb still hasn’t even been found.”

Saiga had simply asked his superiors, “If the orb is found, how should we respond?” Of course, he *had* planned for Executive Director Mizuho to hear of this as well, not just his direct superior. That part might have been unusual.

“Regardless, D-Powers have announced their plans to auction off the orb,” Terasawa said. “Before doing so, they must have contacted your offices.”

“I only asked my superiors about the preliminary stages of possible negotiations. For instance, what should we do if the orb is found? Should we

buy it? Anything beyond that is none of my concern.”

Seeming quite parched, Saiga drained the rest of his gin and tonic in one gulp. He then cocked his head at Terasawa as if to ask, “What else could I have done?”

“And what about that utterly stupid conclusion?” Terasawa asked. After hearing the details from Tanaka, he’d been overcome with frustration.

“That’s also none of my concern,” Saiga answered.

Terasawa gazed at the section chief suspiciously. Without a doubt, Saiga had created this situation, manipulating the time and place at which the meeting had occurred.

When the conversation paused, the bartender came over to take their second order. Seeing this, Terasawa whispered to Saiga, “Apparently, the malts here are fantastic.”

Rows of rather fine bottles packed the liquor shelves behind a glass door. Even in the dim illumination, Saiga could make out the most distinctive ones. Considering the steep price increases of recent years, the potential cost of those bottles worried him. However, if Terasawa was recommending them, their prices must have been relatively fair. Yet at this point in the night, he still couldn’t get drunk on strong liquor.

“I suppose it’s a bit too early for a neat.”

Laughing, Saiga parodied one of Terry Lennox’s famous lines from *The Long Goodbye*, ordering whiskey diluted with water. When the bartender asked for his preferred liquor, Saiga requested the establishment’s standard. Thus, the bartender grabbed a bottle of The Famous Grouse, making the drink with a deft hand.

“D-Powers only entered Yoyogi Dungeon earlier today,” Saiga said. “Likewise, the auction won’t begin until tomorrow. In reality, the product might not even exist yet. Despite all this, the world has begun moving as if D-Powers has actually found the orb. Don’t you find that unusual?”

Terasawa agreed with Saiga wholeheartedly. Come December first, intelligence agencies across the world would be laser focused on D-Powers.

That was just a fact. Yet this late into the situation, digging into the matter would gain them nothing. Right now, Terasawa wanted only one thing: regaining Japan's preferential buying rights. Today's objective was in service of that.

"Saiga," Terasawa said. "Like you said, the auction still hasn't started. In Japanese Standard Time, it won't begin until 2 p.m. tomorrow."

Leaning an elbow on the counter, Saiga brought his glass of diluted Famous to his lips. He listened to Terasawa quietly, not turning in the other man's direction.

"In other words, we still have time," Terasawa continued. "If we work fast, we can still put a stop to the auction, and—"

"Terasawa."

Though Saiga had listened in silence up until now, he suddenly interrupted the other man. Noticing Saiga's sudden change in demeanor, Terasawa quit speaking, staring at the man's profile.

"If we could come up with adequate compensation, I would leave right now, bow my head to D-Powers, and ask them to halt the auction. They might even do it."

Truthfully, Saiga wasn't certain if D-Powers would heed such a request from him. However, he could emphasize the troublesome nature of any transaction surrounding Otherworldly Language Comprehension. Afterwards, he could instruct Naruse to make a tearful appeal. If he did those two things, D-Powers might end up folding all too easily. That being said...

"In that case—" Terasawa began.

"If you actually obtained that orb, what would you do with it?" Saiga interrupted.

Pinching the rim of his tumbler, he spun the glass around, the ice producing a clinking sound.

"...What do you mean?" Terasawa asked. "In terms of diplomacy and national security, it would be the perfect trump ca—"

“The perfect trump card?” Saiga interrupted again, slamming his glass onto the coaster. “Consider the ramifications for a moment. Even if Japan obtained this orb, who would we force to use it? A scholar, a bureaucrat, a member of the JDA? Or would one of your SDF soldiers use it, perhaps?”



Once Japan obtained the orb, everything else would be up to the politicians. Terasawa hadn't considered anything beyond that. As such, he didn't have an answer to Saiga's questions.

"Listen," Saiga continued. "No matter who we force to use that orb, their chance at a normal life is gone for good."

That person would gain access to writing only they could read. If those texts contained outrageous secrets, would they have the courage to translate them? And even if they did, would people believe those translations? In the end, how many people could live their entire lives while bearing the excruciating burden of humanity's suspicion? Especially in this country.

"Even so, someone will have to fulfill that role," Terasawa said.

"That may be true." Saiga paused here, considering how Terasawa's words overflowed with a sense of duty. Based on this, he decided to change the direction of the conversation. "Say, Terasawa. Is the phrase 'for the good of Japan' what compels your thinking?"

"Well, to some degree. Nature of my job, you could say."

Terasawa hesitated somewhat, recalling some of the ridiculous arguments surrounding Japan purchasing the orb. But ultimately, he gave this reply. Believing something for oneself and pushing those beliefs onto others were two different things.

Saiga shook his head. "I see. Even so, is obtaining this orb really for the good of Japan?"

"What do you mean?" Terasawa asked, turning to face Saiga.

"Even if Otherworldly Language Comprehension is put up for auction, there are only two copies of this orb in the entire world. Because of this, any differences in the translation will lead to endless, circular arguments."

Terasawa nodded.

"If differences *do* occur, does Japan have the power to convince the world that Russia is lying?" Saiga asked.

"The West would support Japan's translation," Terasawa replied, donning a

humorless smile. “They have that much trust in us, at least.”

“And what do you think that trust is based upon, exactly?”

“I would like to say, ‘the efforts of the Japanese people after World War II.’ But at its root, that trust is probably the result of economic prosperity thanks to the Japan America alliance.”

Japan might have been ridiculed as “America’s loyal dog” from time to time, but undeniably, this alliance had proven beneficial.

Nodding slightly, Saiga continued. “Precisely. And if I were Russia, I would—after some time—suddenly make concessions on the Kuril Islands dispute.”

“That would be disastrous...”

If such a thing actually occurred, it would seem like a budding alliance between Japan and Russia. Even if nothing could have been further from the truth.

“Cultivating suspicion between Japan and America is a rather splendid idea, don’t you think?” Saiga asked.

Over time, even the smallest doubts within one’s heart could grow to monstrous size. Eventually, the very roots of America’s trust in Japan could wither and die.

“In other words, Russia might attempt to divide and conquer?” Terasawa asked.

“Listen to me. By obtaining this language orb, we might as well be drawing the Joker. The factions within the national Diet and those vying for authority can’t hope to handle it.”

So long as America—the world’s strongest military power—didn’t have a translator within their borders, they would never rest easy. Terasawa could envision the US placing pressure on them over every little thing.

“Well then,” he said. “Couldn’t Japan obtain the orb and then transfer it to America?”

“I would advise against that,” Saiga answered. “Our country has its own set of circumstances. As soon as the seller becomes the state, we’ll face all kinds of

pressures. Yet if the seller remains a mere individual, placing national level pressure on them would be difficult.”

Doing so would resemble using a heavy machine gun to kill a water flea. Not a fitting reaction to the situation.

Saiga gulped down his diluted whiskey. “Let’s have two countries in similar positions keep each other in check. Russia will reveal what America wants to hide, and America will do the same for Russia. That will strike the perfect balance.”

“Are you not worried about America and Russia joining hands to deceive other countries?”

In response to Terasawa’s quip, Saiga’s mouth formed into a dark smile. “Should that actually happen, the world will be controlled by two countries, regardless of whether they possess the orb. Not much different from the present, right?”

Indeed, if America and Russia joined hands, no military force in the world would be able to resist them.

“Sure, we’re sitting at the same table and using the same cards, but Russia and America? Those two are playing a completely different game than the rest of the world.” Saiga raised his glass towards Terasawa. “In that case, let’s have America draw the old maid.”

Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Level

A Western-style cemetery spread out before us.

“Kei, this place smells awful!” Miyoshi cried.

“Huh, really?”

If I focused on the smell, I could indeed pick up the slight stench of decay. Since we were dealing with zombies, perhaps that much should have been obvious. Still, once you defeated a monster, it would disappear. So, what was with the lingering stench?

We headed in the opposite direction of the stairs leading to the eleventh

level. After a while, groaning zombies began appearing from various graves. First, I decided to test out my water lances on them. Since Life Detection hadn't reacted to any other explorers in the area, no one would see us.

If I struck a zombie in the head, my water lance would one-shot it. However, if I accidentally struck a zombie in the foot, it would continue dragging its upper body towards me, even if its lower half had been blown away.

"Is this *Resident* friggin' *Evil*?!" I cried.

The road was narrow with gravestones packed together on either side. As a result, the zombies crawling towards us were difficult to see, making for a huge pain in the ass. And incidentally, Life Detection hardly even reacted to them. In short, they were stealth enemies. If I concentrated hard enough, I could make them out. But even so, these undead creatures were turning into quite the nuisance.

"Miyoshi!" I cried. "Let's set up a base on top of that hill in front of us!"

"Roger that."

The sun had begun setting. Firing off iron balls and magic, we raced up the hill a short distance away. While I exterminated the monsters surrounding us, Miyoshi withdrew the RV from Storage, and once inside, we slammed the door shut.

Since we'd removed the rear ladder, the RV had become a sort of fortress. Even if monsters flattened the tires, it wouldn't be of any concern to us.

I sighed. "Only three more monsters to go until I reach the next one hundred."

Miyoshi booted up the surveillance monitor. Though it was already dark outside, the monitor looked relatively clear.

"What's this?" I asked. "Infrared vision?"

"Right now, I'm mostly amplifying visible light," Miyoshi replied. "Zombies don't have heat. At least, I don't think so."

"Yeah, I don't know about that, but so long as we can see them, nothing else matters. Still, now that you mention it, the tenth level has light sources even at

night, huh?”

Despite being inside a dungeon, stars still twinkled in the night sky. If any werewolves resided here, there would probably be a moon as well. Furthermore, something like torchlight occasionally flickered around the graveyard. Mysterious indeed.

“Let’s save the stargazing for later,” Miyoshi suggested. “For now, let’s get something to eat.”

The occasional sound of monsters beating on the RV’s titanium shield echoed in the background. While listening to this, I withdrew two bento boxes from Vault, and we began eating. Miyoshi had ordered these meals in bulk from a local bento shop. When I’d heard that, the mild extravagance of this purchase had left me exasperated. However, because these meals came with a recommendation from Miss Glutton herself, they proved quite tasty.

After a while, the sound of monsters banging on the titanium covering ceased. I didn’t know what made the undead react to the living like this, but apparently, they wouldn’t pursue us with too much gusto once we hid inside this vehicle.

“Lao Wang, are we really going down here?”

Xinyan—the team’s only woman—spoke to the leader, whose actual name was Wei Wang.

“What’s wrong, Xinyan? Are you scared?”

Xiuying Wang—the team’s youngest member—posed this question mockingly. Because he and Wei shared the same last name, Xiuying was referred to as Xiao Wang. “Xiao” was written with the character for “small” and was a term of endearment. Likewise, Wei was referred to as Lao Wang. “Lao” was written with the character for “old” and was a term of seniority.

“According to the Yoyogi Guidebook, even top teams avoid the tenth level at night,” Xinyan replied.

Checking their equipment, a man named Yuhang cut into the conversation.

“C’mon, that’s in reference to the top *amateur* teams, right?”

“Back me up here, Bro...” Xinyan sighed.

Near sunset, Xinyan had seen an SDF scouting team avoid descending to the tenth level.

Also noticing the sunset, the teams from America and Great Britain had put their descent on hold as well. Remaining a short distance away, both had appeared to imitate the SDF—the team most familiar with Yoyogi. In all likelihood, neither had obtained the assimilation drug yet.

“But the SDF knows Yoyogi the best,” Xinyan said. “They must have the assimilation drug by now, and they still haven’t descended to the tenth level.”

“Xinyan,” Lao Wang replied. “If the Yoyogi Guidebook is correct, the effects of the assimilation drug weaken at night, anyway.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Plus, *they* made the descent. And it’s just the two of them.”

Lao Wang was referring to the party that had gone down the stairs just a little while ago. Though even the SDF hesitated to descend into the tenth level at night, those two had done so without the slightest concern. But no matter how you sliced it, they wouldn’t be able to reach the stairs leading to the eleventh level by sundown.

“All right, let’s go!” Lao Wang cried.

Following this order, their party of four descended the stairs to the eleventh level, chasing after D-Powers.

“Hey, is that the Chinese team?”

From a distance, the SDF scouting team watched Lao Wang’s group head downstairs, their eyes widening.

“I can’t tell if they’re overconfident or completely clueless. Who knows if they’ll even make it back alive?”

“Should we go help them?”

“Not a good idea.” Mimasaka—the scouting team’s commanding officer—said in frustration. “Ever heard the old proverb ‘the hunter becomes the hunted?’ Hate to say it, but at our current strength, that’s what would happen.”

“But both members of D-Powers are Japanese,” one of his subordinates replied. “And right now, they’re considered VIPs. Shouldn’t we go rescue them?”

Mimasaka clenched his hand into a tight fist. “No matter how important they might be, explorers have to take responsibility for themselves. If we’d received an order, that would be a different matter, but no one has commanded us to protect them. In the end, our objective is simply to monitor them.”

If he possessed the strength, Mimasaka would have raced down to the tenth level. However, as a commanding officer with an accurate assessment of their abilities, he knew this to be impossible. All too well, in fact.

“Listen up,” he said. “Never overextend yourself in the field. Incompetence will always produce disastrous results.”

After descending to the tenth level, Lao Wang checked the heat sensors. D-Powers had apparently traveled in the opposite direction from the eleventh level stairs. While clearing out the undead, Lao Wang’s team chased after them. A few minutes later, the sun dipped below the horizon, and the temperature plummeted.

In the fading afterglow, the sound of small arms firing off three-round bursts echoed between the graves.

“Lao Wang, our ammunition isn’t going to last like this!”

Xinyan shouted these words as she used her Type-95 automatic rifle to shoot through the gathering horde of undead.

Yuhang had already resorted to physical combat, using the bayonet attached to his weapon. Unfortunately, as his rifle was a short bullpup, he couldn’t put much space between him and his enemies. The undead assaulted him from three sides, resulting in a grueling battle.

Xiuying attempted to support Yuhang from an opening in the brawl. He didn't even notice a zombie dragging itself across the ground with only its upper body. The undead monster leaped out from between two graves, biting his foot.

He shouted.

In response, Xinyan turned around. "Xiuying?!"

Seeing the zombie biting his foot, she reflexively fired upon the creature's head at point-blank range.

"Stop!" Lao Wang shouted. "The bullets will ricochet!"

Because the graveyard roads were cobblestone, the bullet ricocheted and grazed Yuhang.

"Damn it, pull back!" Lao Wang bellowed.

He then launched a grenade at the undead near the ninth level stairs.

"Oh?" I said.

"Something wrong?" Miyoshi asked.

"Did you hear something like an explosion just now?"

"An explosion? On the tenth level? Other than the undead, I don't think there's anything else here."

I frowned. "Yeah, but I heard something like a scream too..."

"Think a banshee came out of hiding?"

Miyoshi turned up the volume on the microphones that were picking up the surrounding noise. As we both listened closely, we could hear something like the faint sound of gunfire.

"Yeah, thought so," I said. "Someone must be down here."

"That *does* sound like gunfire," Miyoshi agreed. "Could one of the teams have followed us?"

"To the tenth level at night? That would be pretty reckless of them."

"You're the last person I want to hear that from."

“Should we help them?”

“They might be a foreign scouting team,” Miyoshi pointed out. “In that case, if we don’t keep ourselves hidden while helping them, it’ll cause trouble down the road. Plus, they’re not exactly close, and they seem to be growing more distant by the second. I think they might be retreating...”

“Well, I hope they’re okay.”

While we wavered between saving them or doing nothing, the sound of gunfire faded into the distance. Afterwards, a distant howl reached our ears.

“Is that a barghest?” I asked.

The videos from our surrounding cameras displayed a quietly rising mist. We could also hear the sound of dragging chains.

“It’s about 150 meters away, and since there’s nothing above us, you should be fine,” Miyoshi said, pointing towards the ceiling of the RV.

As I headed towards the bunk beds, Miyoshi took out a helmet with something bulky attached to it.

“Wanna try using this?” she asked.

“Are those...night vision goggles?”

“They’re AN/PVS-15s. Apparently, the USSOCOM currently uses this model.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You can buy something like that?”

“Straight from the internet, like anything else.”

“Wow, we live in one hell of an era.”

Glancing over the instruction booklet, I put on the helmet. I then headed towards the front of the vehicle without a word, leaping onto the top bunk bed. The manufacturer had installed a door where the sky roof had once been, providing me with a way to exit the vehicle from above.

Poking my head out from the roof, I cautiously observed our surroundings. “Whoa, this is incredible! Everything almost looks crystal clear with these goggles.”

Though the mist was growing increasingly thick, it resembled a normal fog,

lacking the density of the Hound of Hecate's cloak of darkness. After looking around for a while, I found the barghest within the horde of undead, emitting a low growl. From what I could see, the creature still hadn't summoned its minions.

I fired off two water lances in the direction of nearby zombies, striking them down. Immediately afterwards, I faced down the barghest, firing off another water lance. After seeing the zombies break apart, the barghest had become aware of my presence, and rapidly attempted to summon its hellhounds. Yet before the creature's magic circles could appear on the ground, my lance pierced its flesh.

Skill Orb: Life Detection | 1 / 50,000,000

Skill Orb: Darkness Magic (II) | 1 / 100,000,000

Skill Orb: Darkness Magic (VI) | 1 / 280,000,000

Skill Orb: Status Ailment Resistance (2) | 1 / 500,000,000

Skill Orb: Disease Resistance (4) | 1 / 700,000,000

Jotting down the contents of Making's display, I chose Darkness Magic VI, as we had originally planned. I then retreated into the vehicle through the roof.

"If Darkness Magic VI summons hellhounds, does II create the mist?" Miyoshi asked.

"No idea," I replied. "Could be the reverse. But either way, I've never seen a barghest dispel their mist. In that case, if Darkness Magic II *does* create the mist, it might continue to cloak the user until they die."

"Wow, that sounds terrible. Guess I'll put off using this one for now. But according to the database, Status Ailment Resistance protects against all ailments—poison, paralysis, disease, sleepiness, and charm. Oh, and the Arabic numeral indicates the skill's level."

"Amazing. Regardless of its low level, I'll definitely want that one in the

future.”

“Disease Resistance must specialize against status ailments classified as illnesses,” Miyoshi speculated. “But wow, it’s level four. Think it’ll provide immunity against the flu?”

“That would be incredible, but...there’s no point in racking our brains over unregistered orbs. Once we obtain Appraisal, we’ll know for sure.” I pointed to Darkness Magic VI, which I’d placed in front of Miyoshi. “And like you said, I wouldn’t use that one until we get our hands on Appraisal.”

Miyoshi nodded. “I wouldn’t mind becoming a beauty cloaked in darkness, but if I can’t dispel the mist, I wouldn’t be able to go shopping anymore.”

“You don’t want to become a beautiful *mistress* of darkness?”

“Dad joke alert.”

“Well then, guess I’ll go increase my kill count.”

In order to do just that, I quickly returned to the top bunk bed. When I peeked my head out of the roof, a wave of zombies and skeletons rushed towards the RV. In the darkness of the tenth level, the living must have looked like burning torches to them. Either way, I struck them down with water lances, storing the occasional item that popped up. A simple job, really.

Ultimately, I got a little too cocky and let my guard down. Since I was attacking faster than my MP could recover, it had started to decrease little by little. When my MP reached its halfway point, I considered stopping for now and lowered my head. At that moment, something whizzed through the air, grazing the back of my head.

“Whoa!” I shouted.

Without thinking, I ducked and looked around the area. A short distance away, there stood a skeleton holding a bow and arrow.

“Holy crap, there are even skeleton *archers*?!”

Only normal skeletons were listed in the database, but at this rate, I might find myself up against an undead mage.

Just when I tried to retaliate with a water lance, the archer’s head burst apart.

“Uh, what?” I asked.

“Kei, don’t let your guard down!” Miyoshi shouted. “It’s dangerous!”

Wait, that was Miyoshi? How on earth did she...?

Timidly peeking my face out through the roof, I witnessed monster heads bursting apart one after another. Miyoshi seemed to be firing iron balls while looking through the monitor. From inside the vehicle, no less.

“Give me a break,” I said. “That’s got to be against the rules.”

As a basic rule, projectile magic would activate by the user’s side. Thus, you couldn’t use magic inside a vehicle while looking through a monitor. But apparently, using Storage to shoot iron balls completely flipped this rule on its head. Come to think of it, when testing out the skill’s capacity, Miyoshi had said something like this: “When you take an object out of Storage, you can place it wherever you imagine, more or less. It even works if you’re a short distance away. That was pretty amusing.”

With the last two digits of my kill count at eighty-four, I left the remaining monsters to Miyoshi, and retrieved the items scattered around me.

Healing Potion (1) x 2

Magic Crystal: Barghest

Magic Crystal: Skeleton x 12

Fang: Barghest

Bone: Skeleton x 28

Though I’d defeated quite a few monsters, a surprisingly small number of items had appeared.

Wait, do zombies not drop anything?

While considering this, I retreated into the vehicle, closing the overhead door. Sighing, I slumped down onto the couch. “If that arrow had hit me, I might’ve been in serious trouble.”

“The helmet proved useful, huh?”

The overwhelming power of my VIT might have repelled the arrow, but I didn't feel like putting that to the test.

After responding half-heartedly, Miyoshi continued watching the security cameras' video feed, shooting down a stream of skeletons and zombies. Even through a monitor, she seemed to have a good handle on our surroundings. Pretty impressive.

“If you had a permanent base on the tenth level, you could wipe out an entire army of undead,” I said.

Feigning embarrassment, Miyoshi laughed. “Yep, keep showering me with praise!”

Exasperated, I glanced at the ceiling for a moment before standing up to take a shower. “Don't keep playing that FPS all night,” I said. “Find a good stopping point and get some rest.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Miyoshi responded, not looking away from the monitor.

She's like a kid hooked on a new game.

Shrugging, I headed to the restroom.

“Hey, look over there!”

In response to his subordinate's shout, Mimasaka turned around, looking down the tenth level stairs. There, vaguely humanlike figures were dragging themselves upwards.

“We need to help them!” Mimasaka cried. “You two, come with me! And you, prepare to receive them for treatment!”

“Sir yes sir!”

Racing to the stairs, Mimasaka found three men and one woman, all of them battered and bruised. Despite being on the verge of unconsciousness, they continued crawling up the stairs. Immediately, two SDF soldiers ran down the steps, lifting one of the injured onto a stretcher.

“This is awful...” one of the soldiers muttered.

“Hey, are you okay?!” Mimasaka cried.

He spoke in English, hoping these foreign explorers would understand this lingua franca.

“Take care...of my soldiers.”

The man at the end of the line—who also appeared to be the oldest—spoke only these words before losing consciousness.

“Is this the Chinese scouting team?” Mimasaka asked.

“Most likely,” a subordinate replied.

“They’ve sustained serious injuries. For now, let’s use first-ranked potions to make sure their condition doesn’t worsen!”

“Sir, preparing first-ranked potions, sir!”

Mimasaka watched his subordinates carry the four Chinese soldiers to safety on stretchers one by one. Afterwards, he peered into the darkness of the tenth-level stairs. Come nightfall, the graveyard was a horrifying place. This experience had only reaffirmed that truth.

Night fell on the tenth level. The Chinese scouting team had been devastated. Likewise, the SDF squadron had reaffirmed how great a threat the graveyard posed in the evening. Yet in that same place, Miyoshi continued mowing down the undead as if playing a game.

Should I go to sleep soon? I wondered without the slightest hint of tension as I lay on the couch.

“Miyoshi,” I said. “Maybe you should pause your game and—”

Before I could say “and go to bed,” something happened.

“Kei!”

In response to Miyoshi’s panicked cry, I jumped up from the couch and ran to her side. “What’s wrong?”

“Th-That’s what’s wrong.”

Miyoshi pointed to something on the monitor. Something that definitely should *not* have been there.

“...A Western mansion?” I asked.

Until just moments ago, a graveyard had sprawled out beneath the hill. Now, something resembling a nobleman’s manor house from the Middle Ages stood there. And around its perimeter, all traces of the undead had vanished.



“What the heck is that?” I asked. “Did you do something, Miyoshi?”

She shook her head vigorously. “No, I was just defeating enemies.”

Afterwards, she began investigating the cause of this phenomenon.

At the same time, I began speculating. “It could have appeared due to the time, because you defeated a special monster, or because you defeated a certain number of monsters. On the other hand, we could’ve been transported to a different location, but that seems unlikely... Maybe it’s an illusion?”

Miyoshi shook her head. “I don’t think so. The supersonic sensors that generate the map are responding to it.”

In other words, the mansion physically existed, possessing an actual form—even if it had appeared from out of nowhere.

“I’m not finding any interesting numbers surrounding the manor’s time of appearance or the lunar cycle,” Miyoshi continued. “And before it appeared, the last monster I killed was probably a zombie. It didn’t seem like a particularly special monster.” While speaking, she rewound the footage recorded by the surveillance cameras. “Speaking of numbers... Before the mansion appeared, I killed about 373 zombies on the tenth level.”

Hold on, 373?! She killed that many of them?! The fact that so many zombies even exist is mind blowing!

“Could that be some sort of special number?” I asked. “Like 666, for instance.”

“Hmm...” Miyoshi mused. “Three hundred and seventy-three is a palindromic prime.”

“What’s that?”

“A prime number that’s read the same frontwards and backwards.”

“But there are plenty of those numbers, aren’t there?”

Eleven, one hundred and one, and one hundred and thirty-one all fell into that category.

“Counting from the smallest one, 373 is the thirteenth palindromic prime

number,” Miyoshi said. “And you’re always talking about the dungeons imitating Earth’s culture, right?”

“...In that case, are we on Mount Golgotha right now?”

Miyoshi laughed. “There *were* a lot of skeletons.”

Golgotha was the location of Jesus’s crucifixion. The word originated from Aramaic, and in Greek, it meant “skull.”

I’m a G-Ranked explorer, and I’m standing on Mount Golgotha. Is the protagonist of Golgo 13 going to show up and blast me with his ArmaLite M-16?
(7)

“There’s a Western mansion in the middle of a graveyard,” I said. “If this follows the usual clichés, we’ll be going up against a coven of vampires.”

That being said, vampires hadn’t been discovered inside any dungeon. Apparently, there *were* werewolves, but they didn’t transform into humans. I guessed Akira Inugami didn’t exist down here. (8) At least not yet.

“So, what should we do?” Miyoshi asked. “We don’t know how long that mansion is going to stay there.”

A mansion that—probably—appears after you kill 373 zombies in one day, huh? Plus, all the monsters have disappeared from its vicinity. Almost as if we’ve received an invitation...

“I don’t have silver bullets, holy water, or garlic, much less a cross,” I said. “But since we’ve come this far, why don’t we check it out?”

“Sounds good!”

Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Level, Mansion

After making careful preparations, we exited the base and placed it in Storage. We didn’t know if we’d be able to come back here.

Despite how many undead had been roaming around the hill, we didn’t see any of the creatures. While cautiously observing our surroundings, we descended the hill and headed towards the mansion. There, we came upon a

slightly rusted iron gate with double doors. A complex motif of flowers and vines was engraved in the metal. Likewise, strange characters had been inscribed upon the gateposts.

“It kind of looks like cuneiform script, but that’s not right,” I said. “I don’t think these are hieroglyphics either.”

“Honestly, these characters look like something out of *Red River*,” Miyoshi replied.

“What’s that?”

“A manga in which a modern high school girl travels back in time to the Hittite Empire and becomes the Tawananna.”

“Wow. Does that mean these characters originate from the same period as the Hittite Empire? Oh, and there are Arabic numerals written below them.”

Chuckling, Miyoshi took a picture with her phone. “Seems like a pretty disorderly combination.”

Beneath the gatepost’s characters, the number 1000000000000066600000000000001 was written in small script.

What’s this?

“That’s another prime number,” Miyoshi said.

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah, it’s famous in some circles. A man named Clifford A. Pickover named it Belphegor’s prime. It’s a palindromic prime with the number 666 sandwiched between thirteen zeroes on either side.”

“Belphegor, eh...?”

In demonology, Belphegor was one of the seven princes of Hell. Apparently, he helped people make discoveries.

“Is this all an analogy for something major going on here?” I asked.

“Who knows?” Miyoshi replied. “Perhaps everything here is simply to create an ambience, kind of like flavor text. Even so, it’s well done. That’s all I can say for certain.”

Prime numbers popping up in a mysterious world. A reference to Belphegor in a place where something might be hidden. And finally, unlucky numbers like 666 and 13 on prominent display.

A thought occurred to me. “If this is similar to the magic circles you engraved onto the orb chests, the dungeon creator must have deep knowledge of numbers and religious studies.”

Our helmets were recording video, but just in case, I also took a picture of all the text with my phone. I then touched the iron gate. Despite appearing firmly closed, it opened with the faint, high-pitched sound of two objects scraping together. Almost as if the gate were inviting us inside of its own accord.

“During times like these, the gate making a screeching sound sure is cliché, isn’t it?” Miyoshi said.

“Eerie silence and mist always come as a package deal as well.”

This feels like the opening to The Legend of Hell House.

Two stories tall and sporting many spires, a grand manor house stood beyond the sprawling front yard. It possessed an overwhelming sense of unrealism, reminding me of a passage from a famous horror novel: “Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within,” it read. “And whatever walked there, walked alone.”[\(9\)](#)

As soon as we opened the manor’s doors and peeked inside, the “Here’s Johnny!” violin screech from *The Shining* would start playing—no doubt about it.

“Kei, maybe we should...” Miyoshi trailed off.

“Yeah.”

My inner voice screamed at me to turn back.

The evil spirit of Emeric Belasco is definitely residing within an inner chapel. And once that building finishes gobbling us up, we’ll end up as a photograph hanging on the mantelpiece—I guarantee it.[\(10\)](#)

Even so...

“Remember that old song called ‘Surada Bushi’?” I muttered to myself, stepping into the front yard. “Guess it was right.”

“Yeah, I know, but I just can’t stop” went the lyrics of Hitoshi Ueki’s hit 1960s single.

Sighing in resignation, Miyoshi followed after me. “...Yeah, I thought as much.”

At that moment, a large black bird screeched from the peak of one of the spires. As if on cue, the statues of winged black leopards—which stood on every corner of the second story—came to life, turning towards us in unison.

“If those gargoyles are anything like what you see in Earth’s culture, they’ll probably swoop down and attack us as soon as we try to go inside the mansion, don’t you think?” I asked. “And that bird is probably a raven.”

“In a few seconds, it’s going to start squawking, ‘Nevermore!’ I’d put money on it.”[\(11\)](#) At this, Miyoshi’s tone changed to one of revulsion. “But more importantly, look at the edge of those eaves...”

What about the eaves?

As soon as I saw them, a chill ran down my spine. A large number of round monsters writhed on top of the second-story eaves. Upon closer inspection, they appeared to be eyeballs. Just like the black leopards, all of them were gazing in our direction, as if waiting to see what we would do.

“Y-Yuck...” I murmured. “Still, could those be monoeyes?”

“Don’t monoeyes float in the air by themselves? Those seem more like a colony. Like they’re stuck together.”

“Well, let’s be careful. And if they attack, we’ll run away.”

“Where to?”

Good question. Since we knew nothing about the mansion’s interior, I’d rather not get swallowed up by Rose Red here. But if we fled outside the gate, the eyeballs might start chasing us, and I didn’t know if we could escape them.

“Huh,” I said. “Now that you mention it, there’s nowhere to run.”

Miyoshi glared at me as if I were a simple child. “Kei...”

“For now, let’s just escape outside the gate if necessary.”

If I keep attacking the monsters while fleeing, we should be able to make a getaway. I hope.

“...Fine,” Miyoshi said with a sigh.

We continued walking quietly while the countless stares from above the roof kept us on edge. Eventually, we were within a few meters of the mansion’s entrance.

“Hey, Miyoshi,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Were there any automatic doors in the Middle Ages?”

“There *are* stories of Heron of Alexandria creating one in Egypt during the BC era.”

“Interesting.”

As we approached the mansion, its double doors swung open without a sound. Almost as if the building were waiting for unfortunate sacrificial victims to enter and become ensnared.

“Hey, Miyoshi,” I said again.

“Yes?”

“Maybe we really should turn back...”

Turning around, I found something unexpected. The large black bird had flown down from the spire, alighting upon the gatepost. There, the creature groomed its feathers, and its eyes lacked any trace of white. Within those pitch-black eyes, I could see a spherically warped reflection of the world.

“Nevermore!” the bird squawked loudly.

“See what I mean?” I asked. “That bird’s telling us to get away while we still can.”

“Kei. If we turn back now, something’s gonna attack us. I just know it.”

I looked up at the roof, my face twisting into a smile. “What a coincidence. I just had the same thought.”

Having a sense of humor could be effective for overcoming fear. But we couldn’t stay in the same place feeling anxious forever. Paying close attention to the eyeballs overhead, we entered the mansion. Inside, we found a large, empty room and nothing more.

“Doesn’t the entrance hall for this kind of mansion usually have a double helix staircase leading to the second floor?” Miyoshi asked.

“What’s a double helix staircase?”

“Two sets of stairs that form a circle.”

“Oh right, you do see those in movies pretty often.”

Looking around the area, I found an ordinary stone room with a high ceiling. Even so, it was quite spacious, seeming to be around thirty by thirty meters. Bookshelves stood against the walls, and though I couldn’t see well from the entrance, they appeared to be crammed with books.

Why are there bookshelves in the vestibule?

Statues resembling the grotesques of Notre-Dame had been placed in the four corners of the room. They glared at the center of the room, threatening to come to life if one moved in that direction.

“Are those another type of gargoyle?” I asked.

“If this were a game, they’d probably start moving if you get close to the center,” Miyoshi replied. “We should probably just get rid of them now.”

“Most of the time, those kinds of statues are indestructible until they come to life.”

“No harm in trying.” As she spoke, Miyoshi sent the four statues flying. Based on the force, she must have used the eight-centimeter balls. “Huh? Maybe they were just marble statues, after all...”

No sooner had Miyoshi stuck out her tongue and winked than the door behind us slammed shut.

“Oops,” she said. “Think I pissed someone off?”

“If you broke into a stranger’s house and destroyed their stuff, of course they’d be mad!”

Staying wary of my surroundings, I walked back towards the entrance. Three magic circles appeared on the floor, with monsters rising from each of them.

“Skeletal executioners?!” I cried out.

These monsters were large skeletons that dragged massive swords along the ground as they walked. Though usually slow, they would charge with great speed when attacking, swinging their swords around. As a result, they could prove quite troublesome if you got cornered. And these three were probably the first ones to ever appear in Yoyogi.

“Hit fast and hit hard,” I said.

As usual, I quickly activated my water lances, crushing the three monsters. At least, I tried to.

“What the hell?!” I cried out.

Invisible barriers in front of the monsters repelled my water lances, causing them to dissipate.

“Kei, use the iron balls!” Miyoshi shouted.

I withdrew an eight-centimeter ball, flinging the projectile at the monster closest to me with all my might. With a loud thud, the monster bent backwards, but my attack didn’t destroy it.

Skeletal executioners can even withstand the iron balls?!

Still, the physical projectiles had seemed more effective than magic. Hoping that repeated blows would do the trick, I flung another iron ball. When the projectile struck the creature’s head, its knee shattered.

“Uh, what?” I asked.

Miyoshi shouted back a response. “Looks like striking the monster in two different places simultaneously will decrease its drag force!”

The moment I’d launched an iron ball at the monster’s head, Miyoshi had

fired another projectile at its knee.

“Nice one, Miyoshi!” I cheered. “If you weren’t hiding behind me, that would’ve been awesome!”

“Oh, c’mon! You’re the one holding the shield! Where else am I supposed to go?”

True enough. Even so, we still need to take care of the other two mon—

“Oh, crap!” I shouted. “How could I be this stupid?!”

In response to my sudden cries, Miyoshi looked startled. “Huh?! What happened?!”

“We’ve finally encountered a boss, and it doesn’t have any wimpy minions! I can’t make the numbers match up!”

While keeping the remaining two monsters in check with iron balls, Miyoshi spoke in an exasperated voice. “You’re surprisingly relaxed about all this.”

Suddenly, the executioners began spinning.

“Miyoshi, get to one of the corners!” I shouted.

Skeletal executioners attacked in circles. In a spacious area with multiple circles, this would be a threat, but in this square room— “The corners should be safe, right?” Miyoshi asked, finishing my thought.

We stood on top of a destroyed statue in a corner of the room. Though the monster’s spinning attack scraped against the walls, it couldn’t reach us.

“The bookshelves aren’t budging at all,” Miyoshi noted.

“Neither are the windows at the entrance,” I added, agreeing with her point.

The executioners approaching us while destroying objects would have been the greatest threat. However, the walls and doors were sturdy enough to be indestructible, keeping the monsters’ swords at bay.

After the executioners stopped spinning, we placed some distance between ourselves and the monsters. Once again, we struck our foes in two different places simultaneously, breaking their knees and robbing them of mobility. Finally, we eliminated the two monsters with sheer brute force.

Healing Potion (3) x 2

Magic Crystal: Barrow Wight x 2

Scimitar of Deserts

“Apparently, these monsters are called barrow wights, not skeletal executioners,” I said.

“A Tolkien reference? These dungeons are quite the little know-it-alls. But in that case, is this mansion a grave? And does that sword belong to Frodo?”

Miyoshi pointed to a scimitar without a scabbard, which had fallen on the ground. A deep blue jewel was embedded in its hilt. I picked the sword up, seeing my face reflected in its beautiful blade.

“Never seen a weapon drop before,” I noted. “This wasn’t in the weapons catalog that came with the explorer’s guidebook either. But wasn’t Frodo’s sword called Sting?”

“That’s the sword he got from Bilbo,” Miyoshi corrected. “The Witch King of Angmar broke the sword that Frodo found at the Barrow-downs, and he forgot to have it repaired at Rivendell. In the end, Sting wound up stealing that sword’s place. How tragic...”

“Uh, tragic...?”

So, this sword is called the Scimitar of Deserts, eh? Since the word “downs” originates from “dune,” perhaps “deserts” is a fitting name. But we’re in a mansion right now.

“Kei, look!” Miyoshi called.

Just as I finished picking up all the items, something appeared in the middle of the room. I readied myself for another monster attack, but instead, a pedestal with something on top of it rose from the ground.

“An inscription?” I asked.

Something resembling an ornately decorated book page lay on top of the

pedestal. Furthermore, something had been written on the pedestal using the same characters as those on the gatepost. After taking pictures of the pedestal with our phones, we stared intently at the pagelike object resting on it.

“...Nope, can’t read it,” I said.

“Of course you can’t,” Miyoshi replied, walking towards one of the bookshelves. “Still, while that pedestal is interesting, I’m suddenly a bit curious about the books on all these shelves.”

“Don’t wander around too much. There might be traps or something.”

As soon as I picked up the inscription, the sound of a clanging bell resounded from one of the spires. Afterwards, a bizarre sensation assaulted me, as if the room itself had begun to warp.

“Miyoshi!”

Right as I shouted her name, we began running towards the entrance. Fortunately, the door wasn’t locked, and when we opened it, no extra-dimensional creature appeared to swallow us up. [\(12\)](#) When we rolled into the front yard, the massive raven and the gargoyles—which had been on the gatepost and on the roof, respectively—began to shower us with attacks.

As my perception of the world slowed to a crawl, the raven flew towards me. I flung an iron ball at the massive bird, allowing Miyoshi to run on ahead. Taking up the rear guard, I held up my shield, firing off water lances from behind it.

Even after losing their wings, legs, and heads, the gargoyles continued charging with the same momentum. However, I took full advantage of my high stats, striking them down with my shield and expert body movements. While running, Miyoshi also provided support, sending a few of the gargoyles flying.

Once we’d defeated all the gargoyles, relief momentarily flooded my mind. Then Miyoshi pointed to the second story of the mansion, which had begun to lose its shape.

“Kei!” she cried.

Where she had pointed, a large number of the eyeballs were falling from the eaves. After plopping onto the ground, they began crawling towards us.

“Ugh, gross,” I said. “Don’t come any—”

Without thinking, I backed away, shooting a few water lances into the front lines of the eyeballs. All the while, I fled towards the gate. At some point, Making’s orb selection window appeared in the corner of my eye, but I didn’t have a single spare moment to check its contents. Getting buried in a mountain of eyeballs was the last thing I wanted.

The spire bell never stopped ringing. As if melting into the sound, the mansion continued to lose its shape. Likewise, the ground stretching up to the gate turned soft, as if it was also melting. Running grew increasingly difficult, and the pressure from the army of eyeballs behind us only mounted.

Despite all this, we continued running desperately, passing through the iron gate. At that moment, the bell’s incessant ringing came to an abrupt halt. The pressure closing in behind us also disappeared without a trace.

“What?” I asked.

Turning around in surprise, I found a few items left behind. Yet now, only the quiet, nighttime graveyard sprawled out before us, as if nothing else had ever been there. Tension leaving my body, I fell onto my backside. I didn’t understand anything about what had just occurred, but for the time being, we were safe.

“What was that all about?” Miyoshi asked.

“Who knows? At least risking our lives seems to have paid off.”

Skill Orb: Fear | 1 / 40,000,000

Skill Orb: Surveillance | 1 / 300,000,000

Skill Orb: Appraisal | 1 / 700,000,000

Fear and Surveillance both piqued my interest, but for now, I acquired Appraisal, which had been our original goal.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Level, Inside Dolly

We quickly removed our mobile base from Storage and positioned it on top of the same hill we'd used earlier. While ignoring the few undead that were climbing up the hill, we raced into the vehicle.

"Man, I'm beat," I said with a sigh.

"Dungeon exploration is no joke," Miyoshi replied. "Seriously feel like I almost died."

Stripping off my armor, I slumped down onto the dinette sofa. "Do you think the mansion disappeared because we found the inscription?"

"Maybe. Without checking the time for the recording, I won't know for sure, but the bell began ringing at 11:59 p.m. Afterwards, the place disappeared at midnight on the dot."

"In other words, the mansion only exists on the day it appears? It was even polite enough to use local time."

"I think that's a possibility."

Feeling sluggish, I opened the fridge and grabbed two cans of beer, placing them in front of Miyoshi and myself. "Can't blame us for kicking back at a time like this, right?"

"I think you're being a little too chill, but I agree."

We pulled back the tabs on our cans, triggering a hissing sound. After a short "cheers," we gulped down our drinks. My throat felt parched from the tension of tonight. I recalled the sports field from my school days, which had been scorching hot during the summertime. On those days, the kettle water—its ice half-melted—had seemed to permeate my body, much like the beer did now.

Once again, the world looked bright.

"Yep, that hits the spot," I said. "We might've almost died, but we got what we came for."

I placed the Appraisal orb in front of Miyoshi. Reaching for the orb with a timid hand, she suddenly cried out, "I reject my humanity!"

In response to this unforeseen declaration, I snorted, spitting out my beer. Like always, the orb turned into light, beginning to diffuse. Starting with her

hand, the light wrapped around Miyoshi, her body absorbing it.

“Aren’t you the one who told me to say that?!” Miyoshi shouted.

She then wiped off the bubbles that I’d spat on her face, pursed her lips, and glowered at me.

“My bad, my bad,” I replied. “It just came out of the blue.”

“Jerk.”

I took out another orb. “Well then, here’s the next one.”

It was Darkness Magic VI.

“But if we’re wrong about this one summoning the hellhounds, it might produce the mist, right?” Miyoshi asked.

“Yeah, that’s why you should Appraise it first.”

“Oh, I see! But how?”

“No idea,” I admitted. “Once you figure it out, let me know.”

“Hmm...”

Miyoshi stared at the orb, muttering various things to herself.

“Oh, and here are the items I picked up at the mansion,” I said.

Healing Potion (1)

Healing Potion (2)

Feather: Muninn

Magic Crystal: Muninn

Magic Crystal: Gargoyle x 2

Obsidian: Gargoyle x 3

Rock Crystal: Eyeball

So, that massive bird was Muninn, not Poe’s Raven? Still, a bird named “Memory” living outside a phantasmal mansion? I guess that fits. But even

though Muninn is a creature out of Norse mythology, it still squawked “Nevermore!” at us. That bird deserves an award for its performance. [\(13\)](#)

Miyoshi picked up the scimitar, which looked decidedly Persian. “Oh, look at this poor sword. It’s all curved.”

“Yeah, that’s just how scimitars are made. But don’t call it ‘this poor sword.’ It’s Scimitar of Deserts.”

“Oh!”

In response to Miyoshi’s shout, I braced myself. “What’s wrong?”

“Kei, I just figured out how to use Appraisal!”

Relaxing, I leaned back against the sofa, asking for details. “Nice one. So, what’s the trick?”

“I simply looked at the scimitar while wondering ‘What is this?’ and the skill activated.”

“Huh? That’s it?”

“Seems like it. A minute ago, I was mumbling English words to myself like ‘Detect! Observe! Discover!’ I feel like an idiot.”

Yeah, I can understand why you’d want to do that.

“By the way, this doesn’t mean ‘desert’ as in an arid location,” Miyoshi said.

“Really?”

The item name had been written in English. Had I misunderstood something?

“The word ‘deserts’ can mean one’s entitlement to reward or punishment,” Miyoshi explained. “Basically, this is the Sword of Retribution.”

“Wow, I had no idea.”

Miyoshi stuck out her tongue. “It’s all written in the Appraisal text.”

She then began to write in the notebook on the desk.

Scimitar of Deserts

Damage +40%

Attack Speed +5%

5% Chance to Blind on Hit

20% Reflect Physical Damage

Those who incite calamity shall succumb to calamity.
Retribution shall rain down upon those who brought you
disaster.

“Whoa, cool,” I said. “But what’s with all this flavor text?”

“Pretty decent, right? When I view the sword with Appraisal, it’s all written
there.”

“Yeah, but who’s the one writing it...? Anyway, are you able to see statuses
now? That’s the important thing.”

“About that. Something *is* being displayed, but...”

Miyoshi jotted down a series of numbers.

Keigo Yoshimura

11.3

4.6

4

1

15

1

9

0

“This is how your stats appear,” Miyoshi said.

“The heck is this?”

“But when I look at myself, they’re all zero.”

“Come again?”

Right now, my stats were set to dungeon use.

HP: 250

MP: 190

STR: 100

VIT: 100

INT: 100

AGI: 100

DEX: 100

LUC: 100

Afterwards, I lowered all my stats to thirty—their daily use value—and let Miyoshi appraise me again.

Keigo Yoshimura

9.9

26.1

6

3

13

8

4

0

Yeah, I can't make heads or tails of these numbers.

“What do you think is happening here?” Miyoshi asked.

“No clue,” I replied. “Time to run some verifications!”

Most STEM people loved to run tests. With it being past midnight, we should have been tired. However, at the mere sight of strange numbers, we'd entered nerd mode. If not for Super Recovery, we definitely would have fallen asleep though.

I withdrew coffee and a few sandwiches from Vault. Then we began our investigation, raising each of my statuses in order.

“I see,” Miyoshi said. “You wouldn't be able to figure this out immediately.”

Nevertheless, we'd found a hint. When Miyoshi had checked her statuses, the values had all been zero. At first, we'd thought that you couldn't check your own stats.

But here's how it actually worked—when Appraising another person, it would divide the value of their status by the value of your status. It would then display the remainder. In fiction, characters often couldn't Appraise someone of a higher level than themselves. This was similar to that setup. Thus, all the values became zero whenever you Appraised yourself. However, if I lowered all my stats to a very small value such as “one,” Miyoshi could Appraise me correctly. This served as proof of our hypothesis.

Using this method, we'd figured out Miyoshi's precise stats as well.

HP: 21.70

MP: 30.90

STR: 8

VIT: 9

INT: 17

AGI: 11

DEX: 13

LUC: 10

“Kinda shabby, aren’t they?” Miyoshi asked.

“Adults seem to average about ten for each status, so a few of these are pretty good, don’t you think? I’m using myself as the source, by the way. Before I increased my stats.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Still, these results are a simple remainder... If we create that status measuring device, the algorithm will get exposed right away if someone combines Appraisal with the machine’s measurements.”

“The actual measurement values will vary depending on the accuracy of the device,” Miyoshi said. “And Appraisal is a rare skill. In that case, everything should be fine, right? But eventually, the device *will* be analyzed, so we should apply for a patent.”

She said all of this with a carefree voice.

“Speaking of which, does Appraisal display my skills?” I asked.

“Not at the moment. What a relief, right?”

“No kidding. Well then, let’s check out Darkness Magic VI.”

I took out the orb once more.

Skill Orb: Darkness Magic VI

This skill allows you to summon hellhounds. Your INT / 4 will determine your summon limit.

You shall open the doors of Hell, calling forth your servants. In the end, you shan’t be able to return them, and thus, the surface shall become a paradise of darkness.

“So, this will allow me to summon hellhounds, but...” Miyoshi trailed off.

“Seriously, who wrote this flavor text?” I asked.

Looking at what Miyoshi had written, I smiled wryly. What card game had this come from, exactly?

“At the moment, you’ll be able to summon four hellhounds,” I said. “Go ahead and use it. I’d like to test out this skill as soon as possible.”

“Think they’ll become guard dogs for our office?”

“That’ll probably be a first in the history of humanity.”

Miyoshi touched the orb. “If we give these hellhounds titles, do you think they’ll become named monsters?” She then cried out the traditional words of “I reject my such and such!”

After her body had absorbed the orb’s light, Miyoshi shot to her feet, thrusting her right palm towards the heavens.

“Cavall!” she bellowed. “I summon you!”

“Slow down there, Miyoshi.”

As if to mock my exasperation, a magic circle of about three meters in diameter spread throughout the vehicle. And this place wasn’t that spacious to begin with.

“Wh-What the hell?!” As I shouted, something pitch-black appeared from the magic circle. “Whoa... Is this a hellhound?”

The creature was far larger than a normal hellhound. Even at a conservative estimate, I would place its height at around 1.5 meters. Likewise, the beast was easily over three meters in length. What was this thing, a Bengal tiger?

“Wow, I actually summoned one!” Miyoshi cheered, rubbing her face against the hellhound’s muzzle. “And he’s oh so fluffy!”

Yikes. Its mouth is at about the same height as Miyoshi’s face...

This massive black dog had the robust form of a wolf, with its matte fur appearing to melt into the darkness. However, its eyes weren’t red like a normal hellhound’s. Instead, they were closer to gold.

“By the way, where did the name Cavall come from?” I asked.

“It’s the name of a dog belonging to King Arthur’s party. Ever since you suggested I become a summoner, I’ve been thinking up names. If I can summon three more hellhounds, that just leaves Aethlem, Glessic, and Drudwyn.”

“I can’t remember those,” I said. “Let’s just name them Spot, Buddy, Snow, and Scout.”

“What are you saying? Snow definitely won’t work. You name a pet after their appearance, and hellhounds are pitch-black. Take a good look at Cavall’s elegant form!”

“He does cut quite a figure, but will you be able to walk around with him? He’s no different from a Bengal tiger.”

Grinning, Miyoshi patted her summon on the back. “Don’t worry about that. As a fantasy creature, Cavall should be able to shrink in size.”

Despite being a dog, Cavall wore a “sweat pouring from his face” expression. He also looked at me with pleading eyes that seemed to ask, “What should I do?” I simply responded with a look that said, “I’m rooting for you, buddy.” Letting out a small whine, Cavall attempted to curl up into a small ball and failed miserably.

Yeah, that’s what I thought. He might be a rare breed, but I doubt any hellhounds possess the ability to shrink.

“So cute!” Miyoshi squealed, diving onto the curled up Cavall.

Has she always been Team Dog?

“So, can you make him disappear?” I asked.

While this might have been a spacious one, we were still inside an RV. Cavall’s massive body took up so much room that we could no longer move around. In fact, he probably couldn’t even leave through the entrance.

“Let’s see,” Miyoshi said, striking another dramatic pose. She then cried out in English, “Release!”

Dead silence fell over the room, and once again, Cavall began sweating bullets... Or so he appeared, at least.

“Well, that didn’t work,” Miyoshi said.

“Uh, yeah. What did that flavor text say again? ‘You shall open the doors of Hell, calling forth your servants. In the end, you shan’t be able to return them, and thus, the surface shall become a paradise of darkness’.”

Guess there would be no point in a barghest returning each one of its summoned hellhounds.

“What?!” Miyoshi yelled. “K-K-K-Kei, what should I do?!”

“Uh, sorry, but I have no idea...”

I thought back to my fight with the barghest. Even if we killed Cavall, his corpse wouldn’t disappear. In that case, he would stay here until Miyoshi died or something else resummoned him. Of course, I couldn’t see Miyoshi agreeing to either of those methods.

Wait a second. Hellhounds can use darkness magic, right? At the very least, Cavall should be able to sink into the shadows.

“You can use magic, correct?” I asked Cavall.

The hellhound nodded fervently. He didn’t even look like a monster anymore.

“Well then, you’ll need a place to hide,” I continued. “Let’s see. Can you sink into the shadows or something?”

Cavall tilted his large head, appearing to think about something. A moment later, he melted into Miyoshi’s shadow, vanishing from sight.

“Whoa!” Miyoshi and I cried out in unison.

Cavall then popped his face out of the shadow, cocking his head again. “How’s that?” the gesture seemed to be asking.

“That was incredible!” Miyoshi cried.

Kneeling before Cavall, she patted the hellhound on his head, feeding him a ham sandwich. Sure, that might have been how you trained dogs, but this hellhound already seemed to understand human language. Did he really need training? Also, could hellhounds even digest sandwiches? I had a million questions, but since pet and owner seemed to be having fun, I decided to keep my mouth shut.

“All right!” I called. “We’ll call this magic ‘hiding shadow’!”

“Good but not great.”

“I also like ‘stone cold’.”

“What does that even mean?”

“That’s the original title of a Robert B. Parker novel,” I explained. “In Japanese, the title was translated into *Kage ni Hisomu*, or *Lurking in the Shadows*.”

“Again, good but not great,” Miyoshi said.

“Then how about ‘eiton no jutsu’ or ‘inton no jutsu?’ Both mean ‘the art of lurking in the shadows.’ The ninja vibe is pretty cool, right?”

Still, if we used a Japanese name for this magic, we would have to translate hellhound into “jigoku inu.”

“I’m putting a stop to this,” Miyoshi said. “Let’s just go with ‘hiding shadow’ for now.”

Miyoshi waved her hand with a “Who cares?” motion, turning towards Cavall. “Well then, are you okay with hiding until I call for you?” she asked.

Nodding fervently, Cavall sank into the shadows.

“So cute,” Miyoshi said with a sigh.

“This is fine for right now, but if you treat enemy hellhounds the same way, they’ll definitely eat you,” I warned her.

“Jeez Kei, I know that much. I’m not a child.”

“You sure about that?” crossed my mind, but I knew better than to say those words aloud.

That’s the trick to...something? Getting along with others, maybe?

“Still, I didn’t know that hellhounds could use this sort of magic,” I said.

If hellhounds could hide in the shadows during battle and launch surprise attacks, they would make for troublesome enemies. But up until now, none of the hellhounds I’d fought against had done this. Was this not a special

characteristic of their species? Based on how Cavall had tilted his head, perhaps he'd just become capable of using this magic. Considering the color of his eyes, he must have been different from a normal hellhound.

"Should I try summoning the others?" Miyoshi asked.

"No, wait. You should probably do that outside."

If an even larger hellhound popped out, we'd be crushed to death.

"But it's night on the undead floor!" Miyoshi complained. "As soon as I open the door, they'll come for us in droves."

"...Let's hold off on this test until tomorrow then."

"Good idea."

"For now, we just need to Appraise the last item we obtained," I said. "The one that looked like a book page."

I took out the item, placing it in front of Miyoshi. After looking at the page intently, she wrote down what Appraisal had shown her.

"Apparently, this is a fragment from *The Book of Wanderers*," she said.

The Book of Wanderers (Fragment I)

The deepest secrets of the dungeons lay within this tome. There is but one original, and it is enshrined within the Wandering Manor. The dungeon inscriptions are mere copies of this text. Other fragments exist, each of them containing different contents.

Madness shall control any who come into contact with this wisdom.

"Controlled by madness?" I asked. "Crazy stuff. Reminds me of Cthulhu."

"Unfortunately, Appraisal can't understand what's actually written on the page. Do you think the mansion we explored was the Wandering Manor?"

"Most likely. When you defeat 373 spawns of a specific monster, a fragment

of the original book must appear on the manor floor that manifests.”

That sounded easy, but for most explorers, defeating 373 spawns of the same monster in a single day would be a tall order. Some areas of Yoyogi—the first and tenth levels, for instance—weren’t trafficked, and the monsters hadn’t been exterminated. Yet outside of these areas, defeating 373 spawns of the same enemy would prove quite challenging.

“There’s only one copy of the original book,” Miyoshi said. “That must mean...”

“If you hunt the same monster, either the mansion won’t appear, or there won’t be anything in that room,” I finished. “That’s what I think, anyway.”

“We...need to report this, right?”

“Yeah, we’ll do that,” I agreed. “Still, we have nothing but guesses when it comes to the mansion’s appearance and disappearance conditions. I wonder what we should do about the finer details... Plus, there were also those characters on the pedestal.”

“Oh, the *Red River* letters.”[\(14\)](#)

“Let’s put *Red River* aside for now. How should we go about translating that text? Even though we know it’s different from the inscription characters, we still don’t know what language it actually is.”

Miyoshi nodded. “And neither of us has any connections to the liberal arts field. Why don’t we try asking Naruse?”

“Guess we have no choice.”

At that moment, I yawned loudly. Apparently, if you lost focus, even Super Recovery wouldn’t ward off sleep. Of course, if that weren’t the case, you’d just wind up as an insomniac.

“Well then, let’s get some sleep already,” I suggested. “We have a lot of hunting to do over the next few days.”

“Do you think the people who were following us earlier are okay?”

“They’re all trained soldiers from their countries. Let’s just hope they managed to escape.”

“So, what do you think those scouts and ace explorers are doing right now?” Miyoshi asked.

“Probably hunting monsters on random floors while trying to figure out our destination. And once they know where we’re headed, they’ll hunt down every monster on that level in the hopes of finding the orb.”

After all, there was no harm in trying, right?

“Do you think the teams following us are mostly spies?” Miyoshi asked.

“Yeah. Since we entered Yoyogi after putting Otherworldly Language Comprehension up for auction, they must think we’ve come here to retrieve the orb.”

“Makes sense.”

A plan began formulating in my mind. “In the end, we could descend to the lowest level and have them help out with capturing the dungeon, but...returning to the surface would be a pain in the ass, right? So anyway, I’ll make an appearance on the ninth level and have them start hunting colonial worms.”

Miyoshi giggled. “How cruel!”

“Say that while laughing, and you won’t convince anyone,” I remarked. “All that aside, let’s hunt down an army of skeletons here tomorrow. Then we can grab up all the low-ranked potions for ourselves. Having a stockpile of those seems convenient.”

“Got it.”

“Well then, you can use the bed in the back. Good night.”

“Thanks. Sleep tight.”

November 28, 2018 (Wednesday)

Yoyogi Dungeon, Eighth Level

“A bell tolling, you say?”

The man selling pork skewers on the eighth level spoke to a slender, well-

muscled man who had just ascended the stairs.

“Yeah,” the muscular man replied. “Apparently, a group of explorers couldn’t make it back to the eighth level last night. Because of that, they camped out by the stairs leading to the tenth level. That’s when they heard a bell tolling from below.”

“Seriously? They sound like a bunch of idiots.”

Chuckling dryly, the muscular man took a bite of his skewer. “Night fell while they were exploring the ninth level. Since they couldn’t make it back to the eighth level, they relocated to the tenth level stairs, waiting for dawn there. What else could they have done?”

The odds of encountering a colonial worm increased during nighttime on the ninth level. Nevertheless, the area around the stairs was relatively safe. And even if a colonial worm did appear, you could always escape down the stairs.

“When that group arrived at the stairs, the sun had already set a while ago,” the muscular man continued. “Even so, there was a crowd of people there making a commotion.”

“A crowd of people at night? There’s usually no one there at that time.”

“From what I’ve heard, several groups of foreign soldiers had set up camp at a relative distance from the stairs.”

“Soldiers? Why?”

“No idea. If it had just been the SDF, that would’ve been fine, but with foreign armies around, who knows what kind of trouble might have occurred? Those explorers probably didn’t want to get wrapped up in anything dangerous. That being said, leaving the area around the stairs would’ve been dangerous as well. And so, they had no choice but to set up camp at a relative distance.”

“Sounds like that would get them wrapped up in even bigger trouble.”

After all, they would have nowhere to run.

“If you leave either staircase on the ninth level, there’s no telling when you’ll run into a colonial worm,” the muscular man agreed. “Especially after sundown. Still, if you set up camp next to soldiers, they’re definitely going to keep a

watchful eye on you. Those explorers probably didn't want that. And besides, I doubt there's anyone going in and out of the tenth level at night."

Sure, I can understand their reasoning, the skewer vendor thought. *But would you even be able to sleep in that situation?*

"So anyway," the muscular man continued, munching on his second piece of meat. "According to this group, the explorer on watch heard the faint sound of a bell tolling around midnight. Supposedly, the sound was coming from the tenth level. So of course, they started wondering what the hell was going on. That even convinced them to go down the stairs."

"Haven't they ever heard the phrase 'curiosity killed the cat'?"

Swallowing his second piece of meat, the muscular man laughed. "You're damn right about that! But anyway, these explorers started peeking around the tenth level while shaking in their boots. Then they heard the deafening sound of a bell ringing out—like one you'd find in a church steeple. And it came from the completely opposite direction of the eleventh level stairs."

"There's a church on the tenth floor? So far as I know, it's supposed to be nothing but graves."

"I've never heard of a church either. So anyway, these explorers assumed that some sort of special event was taking place."

"Yeah, I can understand that."

Even if you possessed the assimilation drug, anyone who would walk around the tenth level at night was insane. Most explorers probably shared that opinion.

The muscular man continued the story. "While the explorers were doing this and that, the ringing sound suddenly vanished. Almost as if it had been cut off."

"Vanished? You mean to say the ringing didn't simply end?"

"Based on what they said, there was no trailing echo."

"Interesting. Would've been nice if some treasure had appeared."

"Nope, nothin' but sound."

Laughing, the muscular man tossed his skewer into a bucket used as a makeshift trash can. He then walked away.

“Soldiers camping out near the ninth level exit, huh...?” The man selling pork skewers murmured to himself.

This had to be the result of scouting teams from various countries chasing after the target. But in that case, where had the missing target gone? Surely not to the tenth level at night. While pondering the link between the church bell and Otherworldly Language Comprehension, the undercover Security Bureau personnel took out another pork skewer and began to grill it.

Yoyogi Dungeon, Tenth Level

After having breakfast, we summoned the remaining hellhounds in front of the mobile base.

“Aethlem! I summon you!”

“Glessic! I summon you!”

“Drudwyn! I summon you!”

Each time Miyoshi called out a certain name, a large magic circle would appear on the ground. Massive hellhounds—that’s what they were, right?—indistinguishable from Cavall then materialized on top of these circles.

As a test, Miyoshi tried to summon a fifth hellhound, but of course, nothing happened. Afterwards, the summoned hellhounds began gleefully hunting down any undead that approached the area. Based on the look of things, they didn’t seem likely to lose these matches. As such, Miyoshi left them to their own devices. Meanwhile, Cavall sat at her side like a loyal puppy.

“What’s up with you?” I asked the hellhound. “Are you a bodyguard?”

“Ruff,” he barked.

Hearing this response, Miyoshi happily patted Cavall on the back.

“Kei, do you not want any summons of your own?” she asked.

“The barghest’s Darkness Magic VI orb has a cool time of three days. Waiting

that long would be a hassle. And anyway, I'm so horrible with living things that I once let a cactus rot. Though to be honest, I'm kinda proud of that..."

Cacti were durable plants that would grow well even if left unattended for a good amount of time. And I didn't do anything to the plant during its dormant season either. One day, the little guy just lost his vigor, turning soft and springy. Quite the mystery.

"Why would you be proud of that?" Miyoshi asked. "But speaking of taking care of them, what do you think these puppers eat?"

Yesterday, Cavall had eaten a ham sandwich, but hellhounds couldn't obtain human food within a dungeon every day. However, if I started thinking about protein composition and digestive enzymes right now, the questions would never end. In any case, we humans could eat dungeon-produced meats. If monsters could also digest our foods, that wouldn't be too strange. And sometimes, monsters would even devour humans. Yikes.

"Hmm," I mused. "If we let them loose in the dungeon every once in a while, we won't have to provide them with food, right?"

Hearing this from the cactus killer, Cavall padded up to me, shaking his head back and forth.

"Huh?" I asked. "Do you guys eat something in particular?"

He nodded.

"He did seem to enjoy that sandwich from yesterday quite a bit," Miyoshi noted.

Cavall nodded again.

"What?" I asked. "You actually get nutritional value from ham sandwiches?"

In response to this question, Cavall didn't meet my gaze and had a faraway look in his eyes.

"In other words, human food is something of a luxury item?" I pressed. "You just want to eat it every once in a while because it tastes good?"

As Cavall averted his gaze even more, the phantom sweat appeared on his forehead again.

“Oh c’mon, Kei!” Miyoshi shouted. “Cavall and the others just want a treat from time to time. What’s the harm in that?”

Cavall scampered over to Miyoshi’s side, sitting down there. He then nodded fervently, his golden eyes sparkling.

“Oh, they can eat whatever they want,” I said. “I was just curious. But you guys better do your job and protect Miyoshi.”

“Ruff.”

Summoned monsters, eh?

I’d thought that such creatures might exist, but now that we actually owned them, would we need to get a permit or register them with the JDA? What did we need to do about immunizations? There was so much I didn’t know.

More questions to bother Naruse with, I guess.

Also, what would happen to the hellhounds if they died? Would the next summons be resurrections, or would they be new individuals? Despite my boundless curiosity, intentionally testing this out would probably infuriate Miyoshi.

Well, I might find out sooner or later.

At that moment, my Life Detection skill picked up several people. They seemed to be explorers.

“Kei?” Miyoshi asked.

“We’ve got company.”

Unfortunately, we would stand out on the top of this hill. Before our pursuers could round the opposite hill and see us, we cleaned up the area and put Dolly in Storage. We then headed towards the graveyard, rounding another hill that would obstruct their line of sight.

“The people watching us are really giving it their all,” Miyoshi said. “How do they even know we’re here?”

“Who knows? Maybe the people causing a commotion last night made it back alive.”

During the daytime, the tenth level was monotonous, most of its enemies roaming zombies or skeletons. That being said, the sheer number of them would be the death of most average explorers.

Whenever I failed to kill a monster with magic, Miyoshi would order her hellhounds to finish them off. While observing this constant stream of undead, she spoke up. “No wonder people refer to this place as the Tenth Level of Hell.”

The hideous undead surged towards us like a raging sea. On top of that, none of their drops were the least bit appealing. And finally, when combined with the expansive graveyard setting, this floor had earned the title of Hell amongst explorers.

“Still, our pursuers don’t seem to mind,” Miyoshi said.

As our pursuers walked along the road on the other side of a hill, I couldn’t sense them doing battle. At the same time, they seemed to be moving slowly. Perhaps they were cautious of their surroundings while advancing.

“The assimilation drug is more effective than I would have thought,” Miyoshi added.

“When you’re walking along the road during the daytime at least.”

No one came to the tenth level during nightfall, but even if you wandered off the road during daytime, the undead would attack you. Thus, our pursuers wouldn’t leave the road to take a shortcut across the hill, regardless of what they sensed. But just in case, Miyoshi and I moved at double their speed to escape the area.

The zombies still didn’t drop anything, but one out of every twenty-five skeletons seemed to drop a first-ranked potion.

“All the monsters that drop items give out more than 0.04 SP,” Miyoshi said.

She was right. Goblins, slimes, wolves, and kobolds hadn’t dropped any normal items, no matter how many of them we’d defeated. Because of this, everything up to Yoyogi’s fourth level had become known as the beginner’s or amusement levels. Without drops, you couldn’t work as a pro explorer. Likewise, you couldn’t just go GTB hunting either.

“I wonder if there’s some sort of barrier between 0.04 and 0.05 SP,” I said.

“In that case, I’ll leave the skeletons to you while I focus on defeating the zombies.”

“Got it.”

“Arthurs, you guys focus on the zombies too.”

In response, I could hear several faint barks from within the surrounding shadows. Apparently, the hellhounds understood the situation, more or less.

“What do you mean by ‘Arthurs’?” I asked.

“It’s the team name for these puppers.”

In other words, Miyoshi was using “Arthurs” to refer to all four summons at once.

“Why not call them the Pendragons?” I asked.

“Because they’re dogs, not dragons!”

Well, King Arthur wasn’t a dragon either. As team names go, the Pendragons sounds a bit cooler to me, but whatever.

After continuing onwards for a while, our pursuers—who were following the road on the other side of the hill—left the range of Life Detection.

“Who knew that playing hide-and-seek inside a dungeon could be so thrilling?” Miyoshi asked.

“Uh, thrilling?” I repeated. “Sure, we might’ve fled into Yoyogi Dungeon to avoid the trouble surrounding the auction, but even if we run into another group, I don’t think it’ll suddenly turn into a battle. So long as they’re not from Russia.”

“I mean, Life Detection can’t tell what teams are actually following us, right? Russia might have secretly ordered the Zaslon Unit to chase after us.”

And she spoke with so much joy.

Zaslon was a special forces group belonging to Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service. Supposedly, they were the most secretive unit amongst Russia’s special forces.

I shook my head. “You’ve seen too many movies, Miyoshi.”

“Is that all you have to say to that?!”

“Oh, time for another orb!”

There were quite a few enemies on the tenth level. While we made pointless conversation and continued our routine work, the orb selection window popped up. This time, a skeleton had brought me up to one hundred kills.

Skill Orb: Life Detection | 1 / 20,000,000

Skill Orb: Magic Resistance (1) | 1 / 700,000,000

Skill Orb: Undeath | 1 / 1,200,000,000

I jotted down the contents into a notebook, and handed it to Miyoshi.

“Magic Resistance is a known skill,” she said.

The Arabic numerals attached to skill orbs and items corresponded to their levels. On the other hand, Roman numerals corresponded to their category. As such, this orb would be the weakest of all Magic Resistance skills. No wonder our water lances had been slightly ineffective against the skeletons.

“Life Detection does seem to suit the undead,” Miyoshi continued. “Do you think that’s why they flock towards the living like moths to a flame?”

“If so, the assimilation drug might just bypass Life Detection.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Your skill picked up the people on the other side of the hill, right?”

She was right. In that case, there had to be another reason. And though Life Detection only produced faint reactions to the undead, it wasn’t entirely ineffective.

“All that aside...” I said. “What in the ever-loving hell is Undeath?”

“If Xu Fu had found this, he could’ve come swaggering back to China,” Miyoshi deadpanned.

“All right, let’s take a moment to calm way, way down. If this orb had come

from an elder lich or undead king, I would understand—but of all things, a measly skeleton dropped it. This has to be a trap, right? Sure, Undeath might *sound* like Immortality, but if I had to guess, it just turns you into a Halloween monster.”

Of course, Undeath turned out to be an unregistered skill. Nevertheless, we had naught to fear, for the ability to Appraise had become ours! And so, in accordance with our desire to collect all the rarities, we acquired Undeath.

“Do your thing, Miyoshi.”

“You got it.”

Meanwhile, the Arthurs made quick and easy work of any undead that tried to attack us. I should have expected as much. Hellhounds gave out twice as many experience points as skeletons, after all.

But hold on a second.

When the Arthurs charged a skeleton, it would break apart. Likewise, a swing of their paws would rip a zombie in half.

Um, are hellhounds supposed to be this strong?

After finishing her Appraisal, Miyoshi let out a groan.

Skill Orb: Undeath

You shall inherit an eternally undying body.

Undead transformation (skeleton)

Those who violate the natural order shall receive fitting remuneration.

“Yeah, this is...pretty terrible,” Miyoshi concluded.

“So let me get this straight,” I replied. “By using this orb, you do gain immortality, but at the cost of becoming an undead monster. In this case, that would be a skeleton.”

“We need to warn people about this.”

“But everyone will ask us how we investigated the skill, right?”

If we left this matter alone, the orb probably wouldn't appear. After all, it had a drop rate of one in one billion two hundred million. Still, anything that could happen might do so eventually.

“Let's just say we tested it on a pig,” I suggested. “Similar to Premature Birth.”

If we actually tested Undeath on a pig, I had no idea what would happen. Even so, this orb had such a low drop rate that anyone else would have difficulty running a follow-up test. That would suffice for now.

“For the time being, let's just use this to fatten up Vault,” I said.

Thus, I locked away the Undeath orb for safekeeping.

“Captain Mimasaka, this place is gonna kill us!”

Noro, another member of the scouting squadron, complained in the face of such a large number of undead wandering around the perimeter.

“Calm down, Noro,” Mimasaka replied. “Can you still sense them?”

“No. The only reactions that seem human are coming from our squad and the people behind us.”

Noro possessed Life Detection. Even so, the nature of this skill could differ according to one's training and disposition. Noro had undergone training to extend his range in whichever direction he concentrated. As a result, his passive range in all directions was much shorter than Yoshimura's. And with the assimilation drug being so accessible, most explorers would never consider traveling off the roads. Because of this, Noro had concentrated his enemy detection senses in the direction of the road. All of this proved very fortunate for D-Powers.

“The people behind us?” Mimasaka repeated. “You mean the ones who came down at the same time as us?”

“They're probably from Great Britain,” Noro replied. “The American team seems to be heading towards the eleventh level.”

The assimilation drug remained effective for around four hours, but there were fluctuations. If you took the return journey into consideration, they could continue this pursuit for two hours at most. Apparently, you could use the drug successively, but its effectiveness would decrease.

“Do you think the Chinese team filled D-Powers with lead?” Noro asked.

Mimasaka’s squad had followed the traces of battle left by the Chinese team, which had pursued D-Powers last night. All around them, DBP87 shell cases littered the ground. Though outside influences on the dungeons would disappear eventually, not all traces would disappear within a single night.

“At any rate, some sort of battle took place in this direction,” Mimasaka answered. “That’s all we know for certain.”

Half a day had passed since the various scouting teams had lost sight of the surveillance target. At the very least, Mimasaka hadn’t received word of D-Powers crossing into another level from the SDF or the Security Bureau. Both organizations had set up lookouts at the entrances and exits.

For now, his team had no choice but to search the tenth level.

After we obtained the Undeath orb, Life Detection didn’t react to any other explorers. Taking advantage of this, we continued walking while exterminating undead.

Yesterday, we’d needed to be cautious of two things. First, there had been surprise attacks from lurking zombies. Second, there had been onslaughts from the shadows of gravestones, which could be hard to see coming. Now, Miyoshi’s guard dogs had neutralized these threats, further increasing our efficiency. Before long, I’d acquired the complete set of skeleton orbs, and we’d also obtained potions at a steady rate.

Because it was still too early, I was hesitant to kill my 373rd skeleton. However, when compared to zombies, there were far fewer skeletons. I wouldn’t reach the palindromic prime so easily.

“Based on how we’re faring, killing 373 of the same monster in a single day shouldn’t be too hard, right?” I asked.

“No kidding,” Miyoshi replied. “First, you just work out some sort of method for gathering the same type of monster in one place. And then, starting at twelve o’clock midnight, you continue hunting them down for a whole twenty-four hours.”

Whoa, talk about exploitative working conditions.

If any carnivorous plant monsters existed, perhaps they would drop items or skill orbs that lured monsters to the user. That being said...

“Right now, the first-floor slimes are the only convenient monsters to test this out on immediately,” I said.

“True enough. If you performed this experiment on the back of the first floor, that wouldn’t cause any issues, right?”

The other day, Mitsurugi had earned a new high score of three hundred slimes in six hours. If you continued beating them up without returning to the entrance, that could probably work.

Since there were more zombies than skeletons, I used the former to adjust the last digit of my kill count. At the same time, Miyoshi’s “iron balls + Storage” attack continued to wreak havoc. Her destructive force on the tenth level far exceeded even mine. After all, removing objects from Storage didn’t seem to drain MP.

“If I used this method countless times, it might deplete my MP,” Miyoshi said. “But for now, it feels like my natural recovery rate covers the expenditure.”

Thus, she could use this method indiscriminately without needing to estimate the recovery time of her MP. Before, enemies coming within close range of Miyoshi had been her only weakness. Yet now, her four summons took care of any approaching monsters. So long as she didn’t run out of iron balls—or a unique monster didn’t appear—she could probably mow down the entire tenth level.

“The real problem is the price,” Miyoshi said.

“What do you mean?”

“Kei. We might be using these iron balls without a care in the world, but the

six-centimeter ones cost about six thousand yen. The eight-centimeter ones cost twelve thousand.”

“S-Seriously? That’s way more expensive than I would’ve thought.”

What a shocker. We need to retrieve as many of those balls as possible. If worse comes to worst, we could even end up in the red.

“The small ones are cheap, but the large ones are expensive,” Miyoshi said. “I considered having someone cut square-shaped steel materials to fashion them into small cubes. Unfortunately, that sort of product doesn’t exist.”

Well, what would anyone use metal cubes for, anyway? And even if you fired a cube with incredible force, it probably wouldn’t fly in a straight line.

“And so, I’m trying out these low-precision 2.5-centimeter balls,” Miyoshi continued. “They only cost two hundred yen apiece, but they’re pretty much impossible to retrieve. If you hit a zombie with three of them at once, it feels like shooting the monster with a large buckshot.”

This method would only be possible with Storage. Throwing a 2.5-centimeter ball by hand would prove rather difficult.

“If I flicked them with a finger, maybe I could handle those as well,” I mused.

I mean, I could have literal finger guns. Pew, pew!

I tried this out immediately, but brute force aside, the projectile didn’t hit where I’d aimed. This would take a bit of practice.

Four men wearing MultiCam combat uniforms walked towards the stairs leading to the eleventh level. All the while, they surveyed the surrounding undead with disgust.

“Damn. As soon as I’m transferred out of Fort Bragg, I find myself in this creepy graveyard, surrounded by a bunch of ugly-ass zombies. What shit luck.”

“Fort Bragg? Were you guys Delta Force?”

Indeed, the foul-mouthed Reed Chapman had been transferred from the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment—Delta. However, being asked this by

someone he'd just met triggered a slight killer's instinct in him.

"...Why do you ask?" Chapman countered. "There are plenty of other units at Fort Bragg, y'know?"

"What's with the scary face? I've just heard that the USDD's active forces are SMU."

Among special forces, those whose existences and activities remained secret were called Special Mission Units. In contrast, those who operated publicly were called Special Operations Forces. The most famous of these SOFs was the Green Berets.

Another one of the soldiers spoke up. "If we don't leave the road or provoke the undead, we should be okay for another three hours."

"Your name's Duncan, right?" Chapman asked. "Where did you come from?"

"Private military company. The guy with me is a fellow contractor too."

You're only asking this now? Duncan Lane thought, pointing with his thumb to another reticent man with a small build.

A few special skill users had been dispatched from PMCs for this mission. The small man—simply called Rat—happened to be one of them.

Chapman felt as though they were playing catch-up with this mission, and that annoyed him. Two PMC contractors had been dispatched to form a single team, and he hadn't even met them until a few days ago. Still, a job was a job.

"So anyway, how are you feeling, Mr. Human Radar?" Chapman asked. "Did you find the target?"

Rat didn't seem to mind the contempt oozing from Chapman's words. He merely shook his head in response.

Based on the movements of Japan and England, both teams seemed to have lost sight of the target as well. Apparently, they had followed the path where the Chinese team had suffered defeat. Still, Chapman refused to go anywhere near that location since something unknown could be lurking there. If they weren't going to find the target to begin with, avoiding danger would be for the best.

As the American team continued onwards for a while, Rat suddenly lifted his head, looking like a predator that had caught wind of its prey.

We continued traveling off the beaten path, leisurely mowing down undead in a graveyard devoid of people.

“So, about the next orb...” Miyoshi began.

“The next one? If we’re speaking in terms of fiction, that would be—oh, crap!”

Without any warning, a single arrow flew towards my head. Right before the projectile struck, a black spot appeared before my eyes. As the spot expanded a few centimeters in diameter, the arrow disappeared inside it.

“What the—?!” I cried out.

While I was still in shock, Miyoshi destroyed the skeleton archer.

“Yeah, I just remembered there are monsters like this one,” she said.

“An arrow even whizzed past me on top of Dolly. Scared the hell out of me back then too.”

“They say traffic accidents happen after you get used to driving.”

“So I’ve heard. But that black spot from a second ago...” I turned towards Cavall, who looked as though he were puffing out his chest in pride. “Was that your doing?”

“Ruff.”

“How do you like me now?” his manner seemed to say. Though I suppressed a chuckle, the fact remained—he had saved me.

“Thanks,” I said. “Giving you human food every once in a while might not be such a bad idea.”

“Ruff, ruff?”

“He says, ‘C’mon man, you’re not even meeting me halfway’,” Miyoshi translated.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” I warned.

In response, Cavall let out a low whine.

But wow, I had no idea the hellhounds were capable of this. Could they protect us from bullets as well?

“So, what were we talking about?” I asked.

“The next orb,” Miyoshi replied.

“Oh, right. After Appraisal and the magical item box, the next one would be healing magic, right? Still, I don’t know of any monsters who might possess that kind of orb.”

“I’m pretty sure that type of monster does exist.”

“Huh? Is healing magic already a known skill?”

“No, nothing of the sort is registered, but... Have you heard of the holy woman?”

Miyoshi’s sudden change of topic left me taken aback. Indeed, fictional healing magic often belonged to holy women.

She’s not talking about the female ninja known as Sawano Umemura, right? In an ancient text handed down in the Matsushiro Domain, she’s referred to as a “holy woman,” but... No, I’m way off track.

“Like Jean of Arc?” I asked instead.

“No, not like her at all... Or maybe a little like her?”

Tilting her head, Miyoshi told me about something she’d researched earlier.

“A secret society?” I asked.

“Something like that. Generally, the group is only known through rumors—but they occasionally cause a stir on social media.”

Every so often, someone would post about the “holy woman” miraculously saving them. However, these anecdotes would usually become just another drop within an ocean of misinformation.

“Are they using potions to scam people?” I asked.

“The cost rate would be too high. Plus, there are stories of the holy woman healing people simply by raising a hand.”

Seriously? If what Miyoshi says is true, that would be incredible. But rationally speaking, it sounds pretty dubious.

“Those posts are usually ignored, right?” I asked.

“They are, but quite a few celebrities have let slip the name of the church.”

“Sounds like a calculated form of word-of-mouth advertising. Those posts are usually deleted immediately afterwards, right?”

“That may be true, but... You’re pretty cynical, Kei.”

“Oh, pipe down.”

While shooting a distant skeleton archer with a water lance, I tried to karate chop Miyoshi on the back of the head. Much to my chagrin, she hopped out of the way, chuckling haughtily.

“You won’t get me that easily!” she cried.

Damn, this girl’s good.

“So anyway, people have investigated this group,” Miyoshi continued. “It’s based in France, by the way.”

Yeah, I’m sure they did. In the digital age, everyone’s an investigator.

“And apparently, this organization even filed a report with the Conseil d’État,” Miyoshi finished.

In France, religious groups were nonprofit organizations—and as such, they could be established via nonprofit association laws. Normally, the establishment of a nonprofit organization didn’t require a report or approval. However, for a religious group to become a legal entity, they would need to file a report with the Conseil d’État. Catholic orders even required approval. Apparently, this had been done to tighten regulations on Catholic orders, which had historically opposed the government.

“This is reeking more and more of stealth marketing,” I said. “So, this group’s ‘holy woman’ is going around healing people?”

“Seems like it.”

“You could hear this story about any old religious organization, regardless of whether it’s true.”

Most people would probably consider this a publicity stunt using word-of-mouth advertising. After all, the majority of people with higher education would find these claims dubious. At least within the realm of reason.

But of course, because of the dungeons, anything seemed possible these days. Even I had experience with Super Recovery, the various potions, and so forth.

“I understand what you’re saying about the holy woman,” I said. “But what does this have to do with healing magic?”

Even without citing Lourdes as an example, countless stories of miraculous healings existed across the world.

“The church is named Altum Foraminis,” Miyoshi replied.

“Foraminis means ‘hole,’ right?”

English had a similar word.

Miyoshi nodded. “They’re also called The Church of the Deep Chasm. If their order isn’t related to the dungeons, those would be pretty bizarre names, right?”

Eighty percent of France was Catholic, and until a little over one hundred years ago, a concordat had been in effect within their country. If a cult wanted to give themselves a name with a dungeon nuance, “Abyssum Irent” would have been fitting. In the Gospel of Luke, the demons possessing Legion had begged Jesus not to send them there. Why had this group simply chosen the word for “hole” rather than Hades, the Abyss, or Tartarus?

“Considering the times, it does bring the dungeons to mind,” I said.

“Right?”

“Still, I hadn’t heard of them until now. Would it hurt them to be a little more famous?”

“If you acquired healing magic, would *you* want to be famous, Kei?”

“...Not in the slightest.”

“If they want to maintain relative anonymity, this is a pretty smart way to conduct themselves,” Miyoshi said. “Use a religious organization as a front, skillfully manage the healing magic, and have important people obsessed with the occult protect you.”

“Don’t go getting any ideas.”

But come to think of it, that kind of sounds like me. Except that Miyoshi is the one protecting me, not a group of important people... Saying this myself, it sounds a little pathetic, huh?

“They also receive massive donations!” Miyoshi cried.

Tithes given to religious organizations in France were tax exempt. Furthermore, if you donated as a company, up to 0.3 percent of your sales could be treated as a write-off with a carry-over deduction of five years. Thus, if a person was healed and provided a “donation” rather than paying, both parties could save on their taxes. It was a win-win situation.

“Anyway, that’s my reason for believing in healing magic,” Miyoshi said.

“A holy woman in possession of healing magic...” I mused. “Do you think she obtained the skill from a French dungeon?”

“No idea. For starters, healing magic isn’t even registered in the skill database, y’know? Perhaps she acquired the skill through some special means.”

Special means, eh? Like dropping rebar into a fissure in the Earth?

“By the way,” Miyoshi continued. “Do you remember our discussion about clan monsters when we first learned about Otherworldly Language Comprehension?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

I had predicted that clan shamans might have language-related skills.

“If there are monster shamans, do you think there might be monster priests as well?” Miyoshi asked.

“Monster religions would be more primitive, right? Like nature worship. In that sense, I can see a monster acting like a shaman—communicating with the supernatural and working itself into a frenzy. But priests exist as part of a system, serving God as clergymen. That sounds too developed for monster culture.”

“Then what about something more removed from religion? Like a holy monster.”

“You might be onto something,” I said. “If something like a unicorn existed, it would probably possess healing magic. That’s my impression, anyway.”

I was certain that this “dungeon world” had been created from humanity’s impressions. If a monster seemed like it might possess a certain skill, it probably would.

“Holy monsters...” Miyoshi repeated. “When we get back to the surface, let’s search the WDA’s monster database.”

“Sounds good to—wait, what?”

Four dots appeared on the corner of my Life Detection display. What’s more, they seemed to be heading directly towards us.

“Something wrong?” Miyoshi asked.

“Four people have left the road and are taking a shortcut in our direction.”

“Huh? If they leave the road, won’t they be attacked?”

At that moment, faint gunfire reached my ears.

“Seems that way,” I said.

“Is this a coincidence?”

“No, it looks like they’re coming straight for us. And two of them seem pretty strong.”

Neither of them was on Simon’s level, but their stats seemed higher than any of the scouts thus far.

“The staircase leading to the eleventh level is just a little farther ahead,” Miyoshi said. “Why don’t we hurry on down and hunt a lesser salamandora?”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

While I adjusted the last two digits of my kill count, we headed towards the eleventh level, fleeing from the luminous dots pursuing us.

“What’s the situation now?” Miyoshi asked.

When we reached the staircase, our pursuers fell out of my Life Detection’s range.

“I don’t know for sure,” I replied. “But I think we’ve lost them for now.”

“Does one of them have some sort of detection skill?”

“Probably.”

At this distance, you couldn’t track someone with a small device, much less inside a labyrinthine dungeon. Someone with a skill similar to my Life Detection must have been present.

“Even so...” I trailed off, looking around the eleventh level from the bottom of the staircase.

It was a volcanic area. The temperature had suddenly shot through the roof, and plumes of smoke erupted here and there.

“Something just occurred to me,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Do we really need Fire Magic?”

Folding her arms, Miyoshi glared at me reproachfully.

“Wh-What’s with that look?” I asked.

“Kei. If you can’t deal with the heat, just come out and say it.”

“D-Dearest Miyoshi, haven’t you ever heard the term ‘innocent until proven guilty’? I mean, if we just need to start a fire, a normal lighter will do the trick, right?”

“You’ve used Water Magic quite a bit, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Well, it *is* convenient.”

“And what will you do if we encounter an enemy that’s resistant to Water Magic?” Miyoshi asked.

“Run away.”

In response to my immediate answer, Miyoshi donned an exasperated expression. At the same time, a fireball—about fifty centimeters in diameter—flew towards us.

“Whoa!” I shouted.

Reflexively, I grabbed Miyoshi’s head, laying us both flat on the ground. Without aiming, I then fired off several water lances in the fireball’s direction of origin.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Miyoshi cried.

“Something shot a fireball at us, but I don’t know exactly where it came from.”

Four hellhounds slid out of Miyoshi’s shadow. One of the creatures dashed in front of us, its paws slapping on top of a clump of boulders. In response, a bestial roar resounded throughout the dungeon. At the same time, a boulder of around 1.5 meters in length began to wriggle violently. From underneath the boulder, a giant salamander revealed itself.

“Is that a lesser salamandora?” I asked.

“I think so,” Miyoshi replied. “But we only saw pictures of one after it had camouflaged itself.”

Apparently, unless you were very careful, even Life Detection wouldn’t pick up the lesser salamandora while it was camouflaged.

Suddenly, the sound of a taut string being snapped rang out. The lesser salamandora’s tail—previously held down by a hellhound—had detached from its body. The creature then scurried away.

“Holy crap!” I yelled. “It’s just like a lizard!”

“Kei, its tail is a rare item! Hurry up and kill it!”

If left alone, its severed tail would eventually transform into black light. To

obtain this rare item, you needed to defeat the lesser salamandora after the self-amputation yet before the tail disappeared.

Before I could launch a water lance, a hellhound drew level with the fleeing, tailless monster, biting down on its head. Afterwards, a display appeared before Miyoshi. “Tail: Lesser Salamandora,” it read.

“Yes!” she cheered. “These are super high-grade materials in traditional Chinese medicine!”

“Like deer antlers?”

Miyoshi approached the hellhound that had defeated the monster, patting its head. “Well done, Drudwyn.”

“You can tell them apart? That’s a surprise.”

“Sure can. Somehow or another. The one to first pin down the monster was Cavall. And the one to bite it was Drudwyn.”

Summoners were something else. I couldn’t tell them apart at all.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “If I don’t defeat a lesser salamandora myself, we won’t be able to accomplish our goal, right?”

I’d even adjusted the last two digits of my kill count for this.

“Don’t worry about that,” Miyoshi said. “Since we got the tail, everything worked out great! Well then, can you find the next salamandora, Arthurs?”

The hellhounds barked in unison. In no time at all, they uncovered the next lesser salamandora, their noses surpassing my Life Detection. This time, Aethlem—I think?—kept the monster’s head pinned down. Since no fireballs came hurtling towards us, that attack was probably the lesser salamandora’s actual breath, not magic.

This time I defeated the monster with a water lance, and the usual orb selection window appeared in front of me.

Skill Orb: Fire Magic | 1 / 40,000,000

Skill Orb: Self-Amputation | 1 / 200,000,000

Skill Orb: Self-Regeneration | 1 / 200,000,000

Skill Orb: Ultimate Flame Magic | 1 / 1,700,000,000

Fire Magic might have been our original goal, but I couldn't think of anything more terrifying than Self-Amputation and Self-Regeneration.

"Self-Amputation?" I asked. "I'm pretty sure humans don't have tails."

"But men do have something similar..."

"Don't even go there!"

I won't be turned into another one of Abe Sada's victims! And to do it yourself? Not happening in a million years.

"But with Self-Regeneration, it'll grow back, right?" Miyoshi asked.

"Listen here..."

"Don't be gross, Kei. I'm talking about your hair. It's your long, *looong* friend, remember?"

"Oh, right. Of course."

Miyoshi was a fellow viewer of old commercials on YouTube and other platforms. Right now, she was referencing a classic ad for Karoyan hair restoration. "Once you start to lose your hair, then you'll realize," the advertisement stated. "It's your long, *looong* friend." If you removed the "bristle" radical from the kanji for "hair," it could be read as "long friend."

I almost expected her to start chanting, "I can see it, I can see it!" That would be a reference to an old commercial for Zebra ballpoint pens.

Still, if Self-Regeneration could restore missing body parts other than hair, it would be on par with Super Recovery. It even had a shorter cooldown time.

"But if I had to guess, Self-Amputation and Self-Regeneration probably work as a pair," Miyoshi said.

"I think so too. Self-Regeneration must regrow whatever body part you lost through Self-Amputation."

Based on the monster's inherent qualities, I couldn't imagine the lesser

salamandora dropping an all-powerful regeneration skill. Plus, the orb's drop rate seemed way too high.

"If we found a monster called a planarian, it might drop an actual Regeneration orb," Miyoshi said.

"A planarian skill orb sounds like it might divide your body in half, both sections becoming sapient. Yeah, I'll pass on that one."

"Humans could do something similar through cloning."

Sure, that might be true, but all the same...

Keeping quiet, I obtained Ultimate Flame Magic.

"Are you going to use it?" Miyoshi asked.

"Yeah, if it seems okay after your Appraisal."

Miyoshi glanced at the orb. "Doesn't seem like a trap," she said, not expanding any further.

Feeling relieved, I lifted the orb. "Well then, I do hereby reject my humanity."

As I recited the usual cliché, the light crawling up from my right hand began to permeate my body.

"I must say, Ultimate Flame Magic sounds kind of hardcore," Miyoshi said.

"You did Appraise it, right?"

"Sure did. But unfortunately, Appraisal doesn't tell me the specific incantations."

I considered this for a moment. "Ultimate Flame Magic doesn't have Roman numerals, and on top of that, it's an unknown skill. We'll just have to use our impressions of its name to think up the incantations."

"Return of the LARPer!" Miyoshi giggled, likely recalling how I muttered my first skill name under my breath.

"Oh, pipe down," I said. "Also, it's not like we're completely in the dark."

"What do you mean?"

The kanji for "ultimate" and "prison" had the same reading. Thus, I could

think of one definite incantation—a prison of fire.

A concentrically ringed citadel burns white hot with eternal flames. Fallen angels and irredeemable sinners fill its interior. Nevertheless, those blueish-white flames are the radiance of mercy, whose light incinerates all things within the blink of an eye.

While thrusting my right hand forward, I imagined Dante’s classic poem, calling out its name.

“Inferno!”

Instantly, everything before me shone pure white, as if someone had used a camera flash. Then, the sound of vaporization echoed throughout the dungeon, and I felt a great amount of *something* leaving my body. Through sheer willpower, I kept my knees from buckling, and when my vision returned, I stupidly cried out in response to the shocking scenery.

“The hell?!”

“Kei, what on...” Miyoshi trailed off.

Before us, there was nothing left. No boulders, grass, magma, steam, plumes of smoke, or even the monsters that must have resided here. Only a plateau—solidified into black glass—stretched out in every direction. A fine, white powder covered its surface.

Umm, no other people were around here, right? I don’t think there were, but if I’m wrong, they’ve probably evaporated into thin air by now. Still, what if there was an incredible scout nearby that not even my Life Detection could have noticed? I’d have no choice but to apologize. But yeah, I don’t think that’s the case...

Numerous items had appeared before me. While storing them in Vault, I also checked my statuses, discovering that my MP had decreased by around one hundred points.

“Should we, uh, seal this skill away for all eternity?” I asked.

“...If someone saw this area, they would definitely think a dragon went on a rampage here,” Miyoshi replied.

“Oh, crap.”

“What’s up?”

“That lively group of four is on our tails again.”

From what I could tell, they had just descended the stairs to the eleventh floor.

“Let’s get out of here!” Miyoshi cried.

She began to flee from our pursuers along with her four dogs, who were timidly peeking their heads out from her shadow.

“H-Hey, wait for me!” I called out, hurrying after Miyoshi.

“Are they here?” Lane asked Rat.

In response, Rat pointed in the direction where D-Powers had been. “For a moment, they seemed to be over there. But then they suddenly disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” Chapman asked. “What do you mean?”

“He means exactly that,” Lane answered in Rat’s stead. “They either disappeared, fled, or hid somewhere. Should we continue following?”

Looking where Rat had pointed, Chapman considered how much this team had exhausted their equipment. They had used too many bullets on the tenth level.

“Thanks to that reckless shortcut, we don’t have enough damn equipment,” Chapman replied. “We can follow them for now, but if things start looking bad, we’re out of there.”

Following his orders, the team began to move. Then, they reached the spot where—according to Rat—the targets had disappeared.

“What...the hell is this?” The speaker was Collin Allenby—a Delta Force member who had been quiet up until now. “It looks like a nuclear warhead exploded over a city. Everything’s turned into glass.”

Furthermore, a scorching heat still emanated from the land.

“You think D-Powers did this?” Chapman asked.

Allenby shook his head. “This wouldn’t be possible without bringing in a thermonuclear weapon.”

“Then what the hell...?”

“Maybe it’s the work of a dragon,” Lane said.

Despite his carefree tone, a volcanic area surrounded them. In a setting like this, a red dragon might appear at any moment. Thus, none of them could laugh this off as a joke.

A serious Chapman looked at Rat, posing a question. “Could the targets have disappeared because whatever happened here vaporized them?”

“It’s definitely possible.”

After hearing Rat’s answer, the team decided to retreat at once.

2-3-1 Nagatacho, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo, Prime Minister’s Official Residence

At 4:18 p.m., Director of Cabinet Intelligence Murakita visited the prime minister’s official residence.

“That section chief sure talked a big game about ‘what’s best for the world’,” Ibe said.

Saiga’s proposal had traveled from Terasawa to Tanaka and finally to Murakita.

“But if you consider the matter rationally, it’s not a bad idea.” While imagining several scenarios that he’d asked his subordinates to come up with, Murakita explained the situation to Prime Minister Ibe. “In the end, there will be discord with Russia, no matter which country places the winning bid. Even the EU isn’t a monolith, as some countries rely on Russia for energy. And in all likelihood, many countries will want to avoid trouble.”

Somewhere down the line, dungeon-related issues would become a matter of national interest across the world. Yet for now, Russia suddenly cutting off their

pipelines would be a far greater problem for many countries.

“Here’s the plan,” Murakita continued. “We convince the EU and various other Western countries to stop competing with each other. Then, we ask them to donate money to the US on one condition—should America win the auction, they will share all information related to otherworldly translations. This will allow the other countries to maintain their pride.”

“And since Japan took the lead to organize this plan, our benefits will be twofold,” Ibe said. “We’ll strengthen our influence and establish a high position within the international community. Is that the gist of it?”

“Indeed.”

National budgets always ran dry by the end of the year, and even at the best of times, America’s public finances were in the red. As such, the US would probably go along with this plan, viewing it as a shield rather than a weapon. Furthermore, they would be able to maintain their pride.

“I’ll contact England, Germany, and France at once,” Ibe said. “Hopefully, I can have them organize this plan within the EU. Then I’ll need to get in touch with the European Commission, I suppose.”

The most important countries to persuade would be the economic powerhouses and the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Nowadays, the European Council was a shadow of its former self, controlled by the will of major powers. However, they would still have some influence. Since President Juncker prioritized hiring and growth, he would also want to avoid needless expenditure.

“After that, I’ll need to contact India and Oceania,” Ibe continued. “I don’t think Africa or South America will pose any real problems.”

Neither of those continents had enough wealth or reasons to actively participate in this issue.

“And then there’s the Middle East...” Ibe trailed off.

As of right now, dealing with the Middle East would be difficult. The situation surrounding Islam was an incredibly delicate one.

“The US just withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal,” Murakita said. “Persuading the Middle East to cooperate with them would be next to impossible, don’t you think?”

Ibe nodded in agreement. “Even so, it might be possible to have Iran passively support this plan. Supreme Leader Khamenei has declared that he will continue to resist America, but he won’t go to war with them. France will probably cooperate as well.”

France had close ties with Iran. In response to economic sanctions on Iran, France’s president had even tried to create a financing framework based upon payments for future crude oil.

Ibe considered something for a moment. “If we can convince Iran to passively support America, it might even alleviate some of the problems between their countries. To some extent, at least.”

“But remember—Israel also plays a major role in America’s current positions on the Middle East.”

“From Japan’s perspective, allowing the real world to collapse due to trivial religious beliefs seems unbelievably foolish.”

“And they might say, ‘At the end of our current reality, a not so trivial world lies in wait’.”

Ibe sighed. “Outside of having these foreign cultures accept one another, I see no other solution.”

“There are also those who would seek to take advantage of religion for... No, that’s not important right now.”

“The real problem will be China.”

Despite having few dungeons, China did have economic power. They also placed great value on their pride. Thus, asking China to team up with America to thwart Russia would be next to impossible. And since America had recently accused Chinese corporations of domestic espionage, this would be even more difficult.

“We’ll have no choice but to oppose China in this matter,” Ibe said.

“Most likely.”

“At any rate, we’ll have to start with what we can actually accomplish. Cooperate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs up until the auction is nearly over. Likewise, coordinate with the countries we discussed as best you can.”

At 4:31 p.m., Murakita left the prime minister’s residence.

“Russia will reveal what America wants to hide, and America will do the same for Russia. That will strike the perfect balance.”

Ibe repeated Saiga’s words in a mutter. According to reports, the section chief had made this declaration based on his speculations of what would happen next.

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Message Board [A Gift to the World] D-Powers 108
[Otherworldly Language Comprehension]

1: Anonymous Explorer ID: P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-3321

From out of nowhere, the ridiculously named D-Powers appears and begins auctioning off orbs.

Are they swindlers? Or saviors of the world?

Next thread at 930.

143. Anonymous Explorer

The opening bid was placed! Have you guys seen it?

144. Anonymous Explorer

I did. With that amount of money, a site like ebay would immediately delete the auction.

145. Anonymous Explorer

D-Powers might be calling this a “gift to the world,” but if you look at the situation objectively, it’s just one orb, right?

Plus, it’s only sixty thousand yen. Isn’t that a lot cheaper than the last two auctions? Even I could buy it.

146. Anonymous Explorer

Damn. Maybe I should place a commemorative bid.

147. Anonymous Explorer

>145 Yeah, I doubt that. Anyone capable of placing a bid would be richer than God.

Take a closer look at the kanji being used for the order of magnitude.

148. Anonymous Explorer

>147 Huh? It's in JPY, right?

149. Anonymous Explorer

That's not what 147 is trying to say lol

Take a long, hard look at those kanji.

150. Anonymous Explorer

...Wait, they're counting by the millions?! So that's sixty thousand times a million?!

151. Anonymous Explorer

Seriously?! Holy freaking cow!

152. Anonymous Explorer

Then the first bid is for six *billion* yen?

153: Anonymous Explorer

Dude, calm down and use a calculator lmao

154: Anonymous Explorer

Huh? One, ten, one hundred... What the fudge?! Sixty billion yen for a single orb?!

155: Anonymous Explorer

Now that you mention it, that's a pretty exorbitant price.

So, how did we end up in this situation?

156: Anonymous Explorer

There was an article on a dungeon-related, specialist website.

Back in September, someone in Russia found another copy of this Otherworldly Language Comprehension orb. Apparently, the user gained the ability to read the inscriptions found in various dungeons across the world. All these inscriptions are written in those previously indecipherable characters, by the way.

Oh, and only one copy of this orb has been found in the entire world.

157: Anonymous Explorer

Seriously? Does that mean there's only one translation for these inscriptions?

158: Anonymous Explorer

Exactly. No one can verify if the translator lied or omitted something. And on top of that, it's highly likely that whatever the inscriptions contain is sensational.

159. Anonymous Explorer

>158 How do you know it's sensational?

160. Anonymous Explorer

Because even after more than two months, the translations haven't been released to the general public.

Even so, the translations *have* been distributed to various dungeon-related organizations. Based on that, people were predicting that this auction would turn into an insane bidding war.

Incidentally, the one country in possession of this orb

is Russia.

161. Anonymous Explorer

So basically, everyone wants to verify their translations.

In that case, entire national governments are probably the ones bidding.

162: Anonymous Explorer

Wait a second. If this orb is so important, why would D-Powers hold an auction rather than sell it directly to Japan?

Bringing it to the government would be the most logical course of action, right?

163: Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, and the JDA would help mediate the sale of an orb this important. It would be an incredible foreign diplomacy card for our nation. Bringing this offer to your own country is just a matter of common sense, IMO.

164. Anonymous Explorer

Maybe they couldn't reach an agreement on the price.

165. Anonymous Explorer

If the people in charge of the deal were anything like 162, I wouldn't sell it to them either.

166. Anonymous Explorer

>165 Why the hell not?

167. Anonymous Explorer

Imagine those higher-ups thinking it perfectly obvious that you would sell to Japan. That sort of attitude would probably piss off D-Powers.

168. Anonymous Explorer

Exactly. And if the higher-ups *did* have that sort of attitude, they probably offered jack shit for the orb. In fact, I can see them demanding that D-Powers just hand it over for “the good of the nation.”

169. Anonymous Explorer

Yo! The bidding is already at eighty-nine billion yen!

170. Anonymous Explorer

For real?

171. Anonymous Explorer

Whoa, seriously? That was hella fast...

172. Anonymous Explorer

Damn. With that kind of money, you could kick back and relax for the rest of your life.

173. Anonymous Explorer

With the buyer’s premiums from their last two auctions, D-Powers could already do that. Probably.

174. Anonymous Explorer

>173 No way. Based on their orb gathering abilities, D-Powers probably has several hundred members.

But if someone else finds the exact same orb tomorrow, that’ll be a heavy loss for the winning bidder.

175. Anonymous Explorer

>174 We don't know if someone else will find the same orb in a day, a year, or one hundred years.

If only one country has access to the inscriptions during that time, it would be a huge threat to national security.

176. Anonymous Explorer

Yeah, and every year, America spends the equivalent of around seventy trillion yen for national security.

177. Anonymous Explorer

Does that mean they're just testing the waters right now?

178. Anonymous Explorer

I think so. The EU might even be assembling the UN to place a collective bid.

179. Anonymous Explorer

In that case, the entire world should unite to purchase this orb for cheap...

180. Anonymous Explorer

Due to the current situation here on Earth, that's just not possible. Karma runs deep.

181. Anonymous Explorer

By the way, what's this "okajio system" they have posted on the bidding page?

Did someone named Okajio invent it?

182. Anonymous Explorer

During the previous auctions, there would be a ten-minute

extension after every bid, even if time had run out.

If the bidders are incredibly wealthy and desperate to obtain the item at any cost, the auction might never come to an end.

183. Anonymous Explorer

If you keep placing the minimum possible bid, that's six times per hour. By doing that 144 times, you could extend the auction by a whole day.

184. Anonymous Explorer

Exactly. But for this auction, D-Powers has decided on December second as the handoff day. In other words, they don't want to use the traditional extension method for some reason.

Once the time limit has passed, the bidders won't be able to see the final price. The extension and the final update will only last twelve seconds.

185. Anonymous Explorer

So basically, you have to place the largest bid during those twelve seconds, or else the previous bidder will win? And since you don't know how much the previous person actually bid, you can't just tack on the minimum amount?

186. Anonymous Explorer

Yep. Once the time limit has passed, the bidders will probably pour in all their money at once.

187. Anonymous Explorer

Wow. So that's where "okajio" comes from. It's the Japanese rendering of "occasio."

188. Anonymous Explorer

What's that?

189. Anonymous Explorer

Googled it. "Occasio" is Latin for something like "opportunity" or "chance."

>187 Nice work.

190. Anonymous Explorer

If you change the site's display to English, it says "occasio" lol

But why twelve seconds? I can't tell if that's a good or bad time to end the auction.

191. Anonymous Explorer

Maybe it's just a whim?

192. Anonymous Explorer

Or maybe it's a chemistry joke about one mole?

193. Anonymous Explorer

>192 How so?

194. Anonymous Explorer

One mole is the number of elementary entities equal to twelve grams of Carbon-12.

Carbon's element symbol is "C." And in Base-13 or higher, the annotation for 12 is also "C."

195. Anonymous Explorer

Oh, I see. But I've gotta say, it sounds like you're overthinking things.

196. Anonymous Explorer

>194 How timely.

The other day, the 26th Annual General Conference on Weights and Measures happened in France. They updated the definition to no longer rely on kilograms.

197. Anonymous Explorer

>196 Huh, for real?

198. Anonymous Explorer

lol how do you guys know so much about this?

199. Anonymous Explorer

Isn't it a math joke?

Twelve is the smallest abundant or excessive number.

200. Anonymous Explorer

What's that?

201. Anonymous Explorer

I Googled "abundant numbers."

It must be a joke about the amount of time passing after the limit being excessive.

202. Anonymous Explorer

All right then, it's decided.

203. Anonymous Explorer

We're going with that?!

Domodedovo, Russia

Originating from Moscow, a small bus carrying twelve men raced across Russian Federal Highway A105.

The sun had already set, and in the faint afterglow, billboards written in English lined the side of the road. Even a prominent advertisement for Huawei's Mate 20 Pro appeared above the railroad overpass. It was the twenty-first century, after all. McDonald's, PepsiCo, Hard Rock Cafe, and Starbucks all lined Arbat Street. The matryoshka dolls sold at gift shops were made in China, and these displays also used the English word "Souvenirs."

Farther down the highway, a somewhat futuristic building—cylindrical and made of glass—came into view. All in all, it resembled the arm of the abandoned ship appearing in *Alien*. This was Moscow Domodedovo Airport. Silently, the men got off the bus, holding only the luggage they could carry in their arms.

A uniformed man turned towards one particular member of the group to speak. "You should be able to pick up your equipment at the embassy."

The man who'd received this order nodded, saluted, and turned around. He then disappeared into the airport along with the other men. The uniformed officer—who remained behind—wore an insignia with a Cyrillic "B."

November 30, 2018 (Friday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Once the auction had ended, we returned to the surface.

For two days, we'd gone head-to-head with—presumably—scouting units from several countries. We'd traveled back and forth between the ninth to twelfth levels, throwing them off our trail. Finally, at the exits for various floors, we'd found mysterious campsites erected by Japanese people. Apparently, the SDF had sent reinforcements, and they'd been attempting to pin down our location.

Most people would have expected us to obtain the orb on December first. By returning a day earlier, we'd probably left our pursuers' jaws on the ground.

After returning to the office and checking the bid, I reflexively started shouting. "Four hundred and sixteen billion one hundred and forty-two million yen?!"

Can you blame a guy for shouting? That number's insane.

"This matches the standard public finances of the Mie and Gunma Prefectures," Miyoshi said. "But in terms of pure budget, this exceeds Shimane Prefecture's. It's also on par with Saga Prefecture's."

"You're pretty calm," I noted. "No wonder they call you Queen of the Merchants. I'm about to pass out over here."

"Kei. If we'd used the former bidding rules, the final price could easily have exceeded ten billion dollars."

Oh, right. We used a special method for the automatic extension this time, didn't we?

"In the end, the winner added another two hundred billion and ten million yen on top of their bid," Miyoshi said. "The competitors placed lesser bids of one hundred million, one billion, ten billion, and one hundred billion more. During that time, the twelve seconds ran out."

In other words, the competitors had still wanted to continue bidding.

"And to us commoners, there's no real difference between ten billion and one hundred billion," Miyoshi continued. "Both of them only register as 'huge sums of money.' This doesn't even seem real."

She's not wrong about that.

"So in the end, who placed the winning bid?" I asked.

"It looks like...the Dungeon Strike Force. Strangely, they were competing with an ID from the United States Dungeon Department up until the very end."

Not the US Dungeon Association but the Dungeon Strike Force? As in Team Simon? Plus, they were competing with the USDD, despite both of them being American organizations...? Do those two factions not get along?

“Since NATO members and partners stopped bidding halfway through the auction, they must have spoken privately with the US,” Miyoshi said. “India and the Middle East even stopped bidding next. There must’ve been some pretty incredible behind-the-scenes negotiations going on.”

“So, countries across the world worked together to win the auction?” I asked.

“Seems like it. Making a huge, unplanned expenditure at the end of the year would be difficult, even on a national budget.”

“But here’s the problem. Will the country who actually won the orb provide accurate information to its allies?”

Miyoshi shrugged. “Seeing as similar conflicts occur in military alliances, they probably came to some sort of reasonable compromise.”

Well, no reason for us to worry about that, I guess.

Still, in a mere three days since the auction had gone public, someone had convinced numerous countries to join this alliance, coordinating their interests. Whoever had handled the mediation must have been a deft negotiator indeed.

“Who do you think proposed this alliance?” I asked.

“This is just a guess, but it was probably Japan, right?”

“Seriously? What makes you think that?”

“Because there’s not a single bid from our government,” Miyoshi answered.

“Yeah, this is nothing like the meeting of bureau directors that took place at the JDA. There being zero bids from our government is definitely fishy. Nice going, Japan.”

With that, the curtains had fallen on the auction of the century. On the surface, at least.

“But Miyoshi, what are we going to do with all this money?” I asked. “It might not be ten billion dollars, but this is still too much capital for one party.”

Plus, I’m worried about Miyoshi’s safety, what with her being the face of our party. Maybe I should have considered that sooner.

Right now, only her WDA ID was public, but considering how conspicuous our

recent actions had been, we wouldn't be able to avoid leaks. Especially since the winning bidder would be representing an entire group of nations. And apparently, when a single individual acquired great wealth, odd sorts of people started flocking to them.

"Should we build a factory for status measuring devices?" Miyoshi suggested.

"Once those devices become widespread, the demand for them will hit a ceiling," I pointed out. "Afterwards, we'll be stuck owning a highly efficient factory with materials we can't repurpose."

"I suppose so. But we *will* need a certain degree of industrial power."

"True enough."

"Afterwards, we could make donations or set up a foundation."

"A foundation?" I repeated.

"Something for dungeon explorers would make the most sense for us, right?"

"Well, we do have four hundred billion yen, I suppose..."

"Listen here," Miyoshi began. "Most businesspeople have to buy stock. Because of that, not all of their sales amount to profit. With this amount of money, the buyer's premium for an auction house would come out to ten percent at most."

I couldn't believe my ears. Until now, I'd only considered this matter from our perspective, but under normal circumstances, our party could only expect a meager ten percent—not these enormous profits. Why had this never occurred to me? Perhaps the money from these auctions had wiped my brain clear of thought.

"Even ten percent of this sale is more than enough money," I agreed. "I'll think about what you said."

"Sounds good," Miyoshi replied. When her private cell phone vibrated a moment later, she checked the name and said, "Oh, it's Naruse."

Despite it being an evening on the weekend, she must have checked the records of people leaving the dungeon. She was certainly passionate about her work.

“Is this Miyoshi?” Naruse asked on the opposite end of the line. “This is Naruse. Good evening.”

“Yes, good evening,” Miyoshi responded. “What’s going on?”

“Well, about that...”

According to Naruse, the winning bid had been so high that the JDA wanted to send someone over until the handoff. Sure, having someone stand *outside* the property would have been fine. But even though I didn’t necessarily distrust the JDA, I refused to let any guards set foot within the premises. After all, four guard dogs currently lurked in the shadows around our office, making this a dangerous place.

The Arthurs were somehow different from normal hellhounds. They had even begun using magic to fulfill orders. And not just “hiding shadow.”

For example...

“Arthurs, are you listening?” Miyoshi had asked earlier. “Your job is to protect me and capture intruders.”

The hellhounds had all barked in unison.

Since that exchange, the Arthurs had started using three different kinds of magic. “Shadow pit” opened a hole beneath their paws, plunging its victims into a prison of darkness. Likewise, “shadow bind” used a rope of darkness to tie up its victims, simultaneously causing sleepiness or paralysis. And finally, the hellhounds had begun teleporting across shadows.

Incidentally, Miyoshi had named these magic attacks.

“Our security is perfect now!” she’d rejoiced. However, I was downright terrified of a normal salesperson or religious solicitor someday falling victim to the Arthurs.

Furthermore, the Arthurs were quite fond of magic crystals. After begging Miyoshi for some of the skeleton crystals she’d been researching, the four hellhounds had devoured them with great relish. Human food might have been a luxury item for the Arthurs, but if magic crystals were their actual source of nutrition, their diet might end up bleeding us dry. Even if we wanted to buy

magic crystals, few places sold or stored them. And I definitely didn't want to go retrieve them every day. Hopefully, the hellhounds could treat these magic crystals as a reward snack.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, La Fontaine, Fourth Floor

A five-story apartment building called La Fontaine stood on the grounds next to D-Powers' office. There, three hardened men had gathered within one room on the fourth floor.

Adams—a man with dirty blond hair—set up a surveillance device on the veranda while he spoke. “Looks like they’re back.”

Curtis—the group's leader—used a monocular to watch the man and woman walk from the gate to their office. “Even though we just got this room, it looks like we made it on time.”

Adams, Beets, and Curtis had received orders from their homeland to spy on the house in front of them. Two others named Denver and Eckley had accompanied them to Japan, but neither were currently in the room.

Around two months ago, a high-ranking government official named Thomas had accompanied an Indian man to Japan. Apparently, D-Powers had made quite the fool of him during that visit. Even so, buying an entire apartment building and creating a base there over wounded pride was downright bizarre.

Furthermore, Curtis had been sent here with only a small team. “We want you to wait and see what happens,” their superiors had seemed to be implying. Had this been a full-scale espionage mission, far more personnel would have been deployed. All things considered, this seemed like a rather disjointed assignment.

After he finished setting up the device, Adams entered the room. “So, what's supposed to be in that house, exactly?”

“C'mon, Adams,” Beets said. “Did you fall asleep during the briefing?”

Having just finished a sweep of the apartment, Beets appeared from a room near the entrance, tying up his light-brown—almost red—hair. After teasing Adams, he turned towards Curtis to give a report.

“There aren’t any listening devices in this apartment. We’re in the clear.”

Curtis nodded.

“Yeah, I know that house belongs to the party who started the auction,” Adams replied, activating the long-distance, laser listening device that he’d set up. “But...what are we supposed to be *investigating*, exactly?”

The briefing had been ambiguous on that subject.

And so, their team had three different options. First, they could figure out how D-Powers actually held these skill orb auctions. Second, they could try to uncover some sort of illegality. Finally, they could find something to use as blackmail against D-Powers. But with the subject of their investigation unclear, deciding on a course of action would be difficult, regardless of what their superiors had ordered.

“The higher-ups probably aren’t sure what we should be looking for either. That’s why they ordered us to gather information—to clarify our next course of action.” Curtis studied a detailed map of the area while simultaneously looking up information on this apartment building’s rent. He then gave more concrete instructions. “For now, our most pressing task will be to pin down D-Powers’ actions on December first.”

Normally, one would expect D-Powers to acquire the much discussed Otherworldly Language Comprehension on that date.

“Following them into the dungeon isn’t going to be possible,” Adams said.

When Denver and Eckley had accompanied Thomas half a month ago, D-Powers had played them both for fools.

“Let the Dungeon Capturing Unit handle that side of things,” Curtis answered. “Here on the surface, our main focus is signals intelligence.”

“I’d rather not be forced to imitate some industrial espionage spy,” Adams grumbled.

Though everyone else agreed with that statement, orders were orders. Curtis simply nodded in response and returned to reviewing the information.

Private residences framed either side of D-Powers’ house. Moreover, D-

Powers also had a contract with a security company. Infiltrating their home *would* be possible, but if the slightest thing went wrong, it could come back to bite them later. Since a street ran in front of D-Powers' house, this apartment building—located behind the house—was the only suitable location for surveillance. And strangely enough, seven new tenants had moved into this building very recently, even though it only contained thirty condominiums.

“Bet this place is crawling with fellow spies,” Curtis said.

“Should we eliminate them?” Beets asked.

That one tended to be a little too hotheaded.

“No. Japan might be a paradise for us spies, but on the other hand, this country excels at criminal investigations. If someone else starts a fire, we'll have to put it out, but laying a hand on anyone wouldn't be wise.” At this, Curtis shrugged. “The other spies are probably thinking the same thing.”

Two countries with no ongoing conflicts attempting to sabotage each other would be pointless. However, it would be necessary to confirm the origins of these other spies.

While considering this, Curtis looked down on D-Powers' house. The structure had been built in the middle of a relatively large plot of land. Because this land was evenly spaced on all sides, anyone attempting to infiltrate the house would stick out like a sore thumb. Thus, the other spies monitoring the area would be able to detect them beyond any shadow of a doubt.

If Curtis's team didn't hide their country of origin, the other spies might be able to blackmail them later. That being said, they couldn't just sit here and do nothing.

A plot of land stretching seventy feet in every direction would serve as their game board. Depending on how things played out, seven teams could find themselves clashing within these narrow confines.

Curtis closed his files, mumbling to himself in a somber tone. “This job might end up being one colossal pain in the ass.”

At first, the team had expected this to be an easy assignment. After all, they were simply monitoring an ordinary house through remote eavesdropping. Yet

each time Curtis's team booted up their equipment, they learned the truth. This house had more than a few tricks up its sleeves.

Wearing a large set of headphones, Adams shook his head in resignation. "My attempts at laser listening are being rendered totally ineffective."

Typically, anti-eavesdropping noise vibrations didn't emanate from the windows of an ordinary home. D-Powers might as well have been shouting, "We're hiding something in here!" Still, Curtis's team had known that from the beginning.

Beets took off a similar set of headphones. "The sound-concentrating microphones aren't working either."

And by all appearances, this was an ordinary house.

"Can you get in through the phone lines?" Curtis asked.

Adams shook his head. Apparently, they had exhausted all measures.

"So in the end, we'll have to break in directly and place our own bugs," Curtis said.

For this intelligence operation to run smoothly, they had no other choice.

Whether they used a highly sensitive microphone or a camouflaged listening device, they would have to reach the house to install it. However, if they attempted this, the other espionage teams would discover them for certain.

"We're truly at a deadlock," Curtis said. "All because there isn't another suitable building to monitor them from."

"We've located the ventilation fans, the outdoor air-conditioning unit, and the newspaper receptacle, but..." Adams trailed off.

Each of these was in an unfavorable location. They even seemed like traps.

"It'll be dark soon," Adams said. "Should we infiltrate the house?"

After considering this for a short while, Curtis nodded, seeming to have found his resolve.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Before long, Miyoshi ended her call with Naruse.

“So, what did she say?” I asked.

“They’re no longer sending any guards, but Naruse is coming over right now.”

“Wait, right now?” I looked up at our office’s clock. It was past six in the evening. “She takes her work pretty seriously, huh...?”

“From the JDA’s perspective, this job is worth forty billion yen, remember?”

Come to think of it, the JDA’s commission is ten percent, right? That’s a little too much, if you ask me. The absurdity of this system is finally starting to sink in a bit. And yes, for the sake of this argument, I’m choosing to completely ignore our insane buyer’s premium.

“Still,” I said. “Naruse doesn’t seem like the type to go out on a business call at night on the weekend.”

“Sometimes, I can’t tell if you’re actually perceptive or a complete dunce,” Miyoshi said with a laugh. “She’s probably just worried.”

Yeah, that’s what I thought too.

“But anyway, this is perfect timing,” Miyoshi added.

“For what?”

“Having her look at the *Red River* letters.”

“Oh, right.”

Might as well ask her about those while she’s here.

“The text is written in classical Hebrew mixed with Aramaic,” Naruse explained. “The characters seem to be either Old Hebrew or the Phoenician alphabet.”

Naruse had arrived at the office almost immediately. After looking at our pictures of the *Red River* script, she’d used a friend’s connections to get in contact with the theology department of Doshisha Women’s University.

Even in Japan, there were prominent academic departments related to

Biblical languages. They even offered classes in Old Hebrew and Aramaic.

The person we'd been introduced to had been thrilled to receive a request from the JDA. In no time at all, they'd sent us back a translation. That being said, it was now past eleven in the evening.

"What the heck?" Miyoshi asked. "That's pretty convoluted."

"The Hebrew alphabet originated from the Aramaic alphabet, which—in turn—borrowed from the Phoenician alphabet," Naruse said. "Because of that, Aramaic characters are almost identical to Phoenician ones. Also, Old Hebrew characters predate the language's modern writing system. Because of all that, the ancient Hebrew script is very similar to Phoenician as well."

"Oh, so that's why you can write with a mixture of the three," I said.

"Precisely," Naruse answered with a nod. "From what I understand, Old Hebrew has a small vocabulary. As a result, the sentences in question are a mixture of Old Hebrew and Aramaic."

"But why are these even written in Old Hebrew?" I asked with a frown.

"Probably because it's the language of God," Miyoshi answered in a carefree tone.

In response to these fitting words, I couldn't help but chuckle. "Whoever created these dungeons sure is overdramatic. First, God was in his heaven. Then he became one with the internet. Now, he resides within the dungeons, eh?"

While speaking, I pointed up, then towards the PC, and then down at my feet.

"The translator had some other interesting things to say about the text," Naruse said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"According to him, this text gives the impression of an AI coming into contact with ancient Middle Eastern literature for the first time. It then mistook Old Hebrew and Aramaic for the same language, learning them as one."

AI, huh? If the dungeons can think for themselves, it would definitely be something like artificial intelligence.

“So, what was the actual translation?” I asked.

“The text on the pedestal used extremely roundabout phrasing,” Naruse replied. “But in summary, it said something like ‘Wanderer, behold the wisdom of the true grimoire’.”

“And what about the gatepost?”

“That one read as ‘The Wandering Manor’.”

The “true grimoire” must have been in reference to the original *Book of Wanderers*. However, “beholding” this wisdom would require Otherworldly Language Comprehension.

What in the world is inscribed on that page?

“So...what is this manor, exactly?” Naruse asked. “It couldn’t have been inside Yoyo D, right? To my knowledge, nothing of the sort has ever been reported.”

Miyoshi and I exchanged glances. Immediately, we began relaying our experience.

“In other words, if you fulfill a certain set of conditions, the Wandering Manor appears on your current floor?” Naruse asked. “And it continues to exist until the end of the day?”

“Those are just guesses, though,” I replied.

“So, about this mansion—”

“It’ll be much faster if you just take a look,” Miyoshi interrupted.

While I closed all the blinds in the office, Miyoshi took out the memory card with the video she’d edited. She then inserted the device into the seventy-inch monitor in our reception area.

“Don’t tell me...” Naruse trailed off.

“The video starts after we enter the mansion,” Miyoshi said. “Oh, and the footage comes from the action cameras attached to our helmets.”

Thankfully, she’d removed the audio from the video. I couldn’t let anyone hear me freaking out, after all. That would be downright embarrassing.

Shortly after the sun had set, two men in pure black, inconspicuous clothing stood in the shadow of the apartment building. Two other men lay completely motionless at their feet. The average onlooker wouldn't have been able to tell if they were unconscious or dead.

"This is Alpha," Adams said over the two-way radio. "The weasel appears to be tired. Over."

"This is base," Curtis replied on the other end. "Roger that. The picnic is going according to plan. Over."

"Think it's okay to leave them alive?" Beets asked.

"Killing someone in Japan will hinder the rest of the operation," Adams answered. "Might be more trouble than it's worth, but we'll just put them to sleep for now."

"Got it. Well then, time for the picnic."

"Base," Adams said over the radio. "This is Alpha. We're beginning the operation. Over."

"This is Base. Read you loud and clear, Alpha. Over and out."

After ending the call, Adams climbed over the garden fence without making a sound. With trees and plants around the fence, he wouldn't have to worry about exposing his defenseless form.

A garden spread out before Adams through his night vision goggles, appearing completely devoid of danger. However, if he leapt out into the open, the other teams surveilling this house would notice him. Of course, even if they were discovered, the other teams wouldn't know his affiliation. Thus, this wouldn't interfere with each other's work.

Still, he would avoid taking any unnecessary risks. Weaving through the trees, he circled around to the side of the house. All the while, the undefended garden continued to unfold before his eyes. His first target would be the living room's outside wall. Next would be the ventilation fans to the side. After quickly setting up the devices, his job would be finished.

While Adams waited for the perfect opportunity, someone closed the living

room blinds.

“Yep, that’s my cue,” he said.

When all the blinds had finished closing, the light pouring from the house vanished almost entirely. Taking this chance, Adams used hand signs to initiate a countdown. This signaled to Beets—who stood behind him—when to start running.

After reaching zero, Adams crouched down and leapt out, racing the shortest possible distance towards the target wall... Or at least, he tried to. In the next instant, everything went black.

From behind, Beets had watched everything unfold through his own set of night vision goggles. Unable to understand what had just occurred, he stood there gaping momentarily. Soon, however, the confused soldier reported back to Base.

“B-Base. This is Bravo. Alpha just...just disappeared?!”

“This is Base. What do you mean ‘disappeared’?” No response came from Beets. Inside the apartment, Curtis began calling out to him in a panic. “This is Base. Alpha? Hey, Alpha! Answer me! Over!”

Only silence emanated from the radio.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, La Fontaine, Fifth Floor

After receiving word from Yokota Air Base, an American team had taken up position on the fifth floor of the same apartment building. They’d begun surveilling Miyoshi’s former residence at the beginning of November. And when she’d moved into this house, they’d relocated to this apartment.

They were also watching to see if the DSF’s Team Simon would do anything foolhardy. Even so, no one actually expected them to be a match for Team Simon. The only way to keep those superhumans in check would be to rely upon the DSF’s chain of command.

Larry—who had been put on night watch—spoke to his good friend Kayama. “Take a look at this. Those guys who just moved in today are already springing

into action.”

While nibbling on a fast food cheeseburger, Kayama hurried over to the monitor with the night vision camera feed. “No one likes a man who moves too fast,” he quipped.

“Still, their training seems pretty decent, don’tcha think?” Larry asked.

Deftly, two shadows leapt over the fence, weaving through the trees and advancing towards the house’s entrance.

“Based on their direction, they’re probably going to install a highly sensitive microphone on the living room side,” Kayama noted.

“Eventually, we’ll have to sneak in there as well. For now, let’s take notes, and —huh?” After observing what had occurred through the monitor, Larry couldn’t contain a shout. “Hey, did that guy just disappear?! What’s happening on the other screens?”

Kayama examined the other monitors. However, he couldn’t find the shadow that had started running anywhere. The other shadow appeared to be doing something in his partner’s previous location, but...

“I can’t see anything here either,” Kayama said.

“Seriously? Don’t tell me those guys are actually Japanese special forces, and they’re already using optical camouflage out in the field.”

If they’re using any optical camouflage at all, it’s to sneak into the taxpayers’ homes and rob them blind, Kayama thought.

“It’s possible,” he replied instead, rewinding the video to replay the scene in question.

Even if he looked at the individual frames, nothing changed before and after the disappearance except for the man having vanished.

“Thirty frames per second isn’t going to cut it,” Kayama continued. “We’ll need slightly more advanced equipment.”

However, such expensive equipment or personnel wouldn’t make its way to a mere surveillance team.

“If they’re implementing that sort of technology, America might be in trouble,” Larry said.

“No, the rear soldier is rushing back to their base. From the looks of things, that wasn’t an intended disappearance.”

“Can you listen in on their communications?”

“You think this kind of equipment can pick up modern military communications? If you lend me the systems belonging to the NSA or ECHELON’s analysis divisions, I might be able to do something though.” Kayama picked up his half-eaten cheeseburger, taking a bite and scrunching his face in displeasure. He then washed it down with cold coffee. “Well, we’ve done everything possible with our current equipment. Once we’ve sent in our report, the higher-ups will decide what to do next.”

Crumpling up the fast food wrapper, Kayama tried to score a three-pointer in the room’s corner trash can. The wrapper soared through the air, hit the edge of the trash can, and bounced up once. But in the end, he made the shot.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“Kei,” Miyoshi whispered to me. “As soon as I closed the blinds, the Arthurs captured someone.”

“Yeah, the spies are probably dying to know what’s going on in here,” I replied. “But wow, we’ve turned this place into a real Roach Motel.”

“We’ll need to get more magic crystals for the puppers, won’t we?”

“So long as I don’t have to hunt anything stronger than a skeleton. Oh, and could you bring me the box with the second language orb?”

Miyoshi glanced at Naruse, who was staring intently at the monitor. “So, you’ve decided to let her use it?”

“She’s the perfect fit, right?” I asked, still speaking in a whisper.

“Hmm, I suppose so.”

“Or I could just give it to you.”

“Yes, she’s the perfect fit! I’ll go grab the box!”

Spinning around, Miyoshi fled into the kitchen.

Where is she planning on grabbing the box from? It’s in Storage, right?

Yoyogi-Hachiman, La Fontaine

“So, what happened out there?” Curtis asked Beets, who had come back to the base extremely flustered.

“...I don’t know. When Adams started running towards the house, he disappeared after a few steps.”

“What do you mean?”

“He suddenly disappeared!” Beets cried. “Vanished! What else do you want me to say?!”

“Get a hold of yourself!”

“The radio’s not working, is it?”

“No, he’s not answering.”

Curtis hadn’t gained a single piece of new information by replaying the camera footage or listening to Beets’s story. Without the slightest trace of heat or light, Adams had suddenly disappeared right before Beets’s very eyes. For now, that was all Curtis knew.

“D-Powers might be more than we can handle,” Curtis said.

With that, he prepared to contact their home country as soon as possible.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Shortly after Naruse had finished watching the video, she sank into the couch, sighing loudly and looking up at the ceiling. Examining that footage so intently must have stressed her out. Noticing this, Miyoshi began brewing coffee.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Do you even have to ask?” Naruse replied. “What was all that?”

“Oh, the eyeballs at the end, huh? Those were pretty gross.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about! But yes, I suppose they were pretty gross...” Naruse closed her eyes, as if thinking something over. A little while later, she reopened her eyes, suddenly asking me a question. “Well then, how much of this do you plan on reporting?”

“How much?” I repeated. “We just reported everything to our full-time supervisor. Did you need to know something else?”

“Huh? O-Oh, I see! Well then, may I report this entire incident to my superiors?”

“But of course.”

While I donned a sinister smile, Miyoshi handed Naruse a cup of coffee.

“Here you go,” Miyoshi said.

“Oh,” Naruse replied. “Thank you very much.”

I waited for Naruse to take a sip before clapping my hands together. “All righty then. Your job as our full-time supervisor is now over.”

In response to my clapping, Naruse jumped a bit.

“Speaking of which, I have a question,” I continued.

“Yes?” Naruse answered cautiously.

“Do JDA employees have their D-Cards checked periodically?”

“Um, no? In the WDA headquarters, there’s a tablet-shaped object from The Ring that’s used for the World Ranking List. But outside of that tool, no one checks our ranks. Since D-Cards can’t be managed in the first place, we use WDA cards for administration purposes. Generally, D-Cards are only necessary to prove one’s skills when joining a party.”

Good. That’s exactly what I heard during the JDA lecture.

“Right,” I said. “Well then, Naruse.”

“Yes?”

“Would you like to use this?”

Wearing a devilishly kind smile, I placed the titanium case containing Otherworldly Language Comprehension in front of Naruse.

“This is one of the cases your party uses to hold orbs, right?” Naruse asked. “By ‘use this,’ do you mean...?”

With a glance, I urged Naruse to open the case. She did so timidly, touching the orb to confirm its name. At that moment, she went as stiff as a board.



Miyoshi placed a finger to her lips, signaling for Naruse not to shout. Yes, Miyoshi had been extremely thorough about installing measures against lasers and other eavesdropping methods. At the same time, unnecessarily loud voices might still leak out.

“D-D-Don’t tell me...” Naruse stammered.

I nodded slowly.

“You want me...”

Again, I nodded.

“...to use this?”

One final nod.

“W-Wait!” Naruse cried. “Why me?!”

“Well, I mean, this one won’t last until the handover date, anyway.”

From a commonsense perspective, no one could dispute this. After all, the delivery would occur after the sun had risen on December second. But right now, it wasn’t even the first yet.

“Even so, couldn’t you or Miyoshi use this orb instead?” Naruse asked.

I quietly shook my head. “A thought occurred to me after hearing the translation of the Phoenician characters. We need to know the contents of the inscriptions and grimoires as soon as possible.” When Naruse nodded, I continued speaking. “Out of the three of us, you’re in the best position to access a ton of existing inscriptions and similar info.”

Naruse was currently a high-ranking JDA employee working in the field. Surely, she could access more information than us regular explorers. Of course, the WDA had publicized the inscriptions, but having quicker access to primary sources was a special privilege for employees. Conversely, Miyoshi and I wouldn’t know what info was being published or where it was available. I was confident in that assessment.

“That may be true, but...” Naruse trailed off.

“We’re not asking you to spy on classified information,” I said. “Our goal is to

access the primary sources of published data as soon as possible and produce accurate translations. That being said, I would still suggest hiding your ability to read the otherworldly language.”

If Naruse’s skill became known, someone might try to kidnap her.

“Even so,” she said, swallowing hard. “There are other people better suited to research.”

I shook my head. “Those people will end up surrounded by red tape. For this project, we need someone who can translate freely and keep their activities a secret.”

“Project?” Naruse repeated, cocking her head.

I took out a rough draft of the plan that Miyoshi and I had concocted in the dungeon, handing it to Naruse.

“An inscription...translation service?” she muttered in surprise.

Indeed. We planned to set up an anonymous website to translate and host already available inscriptions. Because the inscriptions were public and uncopyrighted, I couldn’t foresee this causing any issues. Of course, people would probably criticize the translations as being a load of crap.

After reading the document through to the very end, Naruse burst out laughing. “What’s with the website’s name?”

“Not bad, right?” I asked.

The site would be called “Hibun Leaks,” which I’d ripped off from WikiLeaks. Furthermore, the English display would be “Heaven’s Leaks.” While “hibun” was the Japanese word for “inscription,” it also sounded similar to the word “heaven” spoken in a Japanese accent. If you didn’t know Japanese, this pun would probably be lost on you, but secrets leaking from God’s domain didn’t sound too bad either. Also, since Westerners liked mysterious-sounding Japanese, this would more than suffice. Even if my fellow countrymen and women ridiculed it as a “dad joke.”

“No matter how many times I hear that name, it sounds like something from an over-the-top anime,” Miyoshi said.

“Good,” I replied. “That’s what I was aiming for.”

Naruse tilted her head again. “This is interesting, but even if we create this site, I doubt that anyone will take the translations seriously.”

“There are plenty of ridiculous websites related to the occult, and they’re never shut down for making false claims, right?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“And although we’ll maintain the server and domain, we’ll insist that we know nothing of the translations. In 1948, the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association released a statement on editorial rights. We’ll be taking full advantage of that.” At this, I laughed. “But in the end, I don’t think we’ll be fooling anyone.”

Pressing down on her brow, Naruse sighed loudly.

“Also, about the translations,” I continued.

“Yes?” Naruse asked.

“Soon, there will be two organizations capable of confirming their validity.”

By December second, America and Russia would have access to Otherworldly Language Comprehension.

“Hopefully, this will deter either country from lying about or trying to conceal translations,” I said.

After all, any lies or cover-ups would cause backlashes across the world.

“One more thing,” I added.

“What’s that?” Naruse asked.

“Right now, most dungeon inscriptions are submitted to the WDA and published, correct?”

“Yes.”

“But as other countries start to obtain Otherworldly Language Comprehension, the inscriptions found within their borders won’t be publicized.”

Sooner or later, the number of people capable of reading the inscriptions would increase. The dungeons themselves wanted this. Thus, the more advantageous knowing the translations became, the more newly discovered inscriptions would be hidden within their countries. In the end, the possibility of them not being published would rise.

“I understand that,” Naruse said. “But I can’t really imagine a large number of Otherworldly Language Comprehension orbs winding up in circulation.”

“Either way, here’s what I think will happen if we publish the translations while the orb still isn’t widespread,” I said. “Rather than laboring to translate inscriptions within their own borders, countries will publicize any otherworldly text in the hopes of gaining information.”

This would be similar to economic interdependence. Suppose a necessary good or service already existed, was used widely, and could be procured at a reasonable price. In that case, spending one’s own money to create a similar good or service would be unnecessary. However, based on recent examples involving Chinese megacorporations, things could turn dicey if national defense agencies got involved. But for the most part, I was right. [\(15\)](#)

“To prove our authenticity, we can use a translation containing information that no one knows but anybody can confirm,” I continued. “That kind of information has to exist somewhere within the inscriptions and grimoires.”

Regardless of who’d created these dungeons, they’d thoroughly set the stage for us. And in that case, the sort of information I’d just described had to exist. My basis for this hypothesis? Why, the dungeons containing elements from RPGs created on Earth, of course. At this point, those elements were indisputable.

Furthermore, the “creator” had used these RPG elements to drum up interest in dungeon exploration. And before long, the practical benefits had ensnared us. Now, this creator was attempting to increase our dependence on the dungeons. Perhaps this sounded like a delusion, but I couldn’t think of any other plausible explanation.

“With all that said, the orb is yours,” I said to Naruse.

Up until now, she'd been staring at the orb intently. Now, she closed her eyes in resignation, touching it with her right hand. The resultant light climbed up her arm, sinking into her body.

And thus, the world's second otherworldly translator had been born.

"You forgot to shout, 'I reject my humanity'!" Miyoshi cried out playfully.

That made everyone laugh.

December 1, 2018 (Saturday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

"Good morning."

As I descended the stairs with drowsy eyes, Naruse called out to me from the office dining room.

"Oh, morning," I replied.

Naruse had ended up staying in Miyoshi's room, and right now, the two were in the middle of breakfast, nibbling on toast.

"You're up early," I said to Naruse.

"Well, I need to leave here before it gets too late and change clothes at Yoyogi."

Apparently, she had a change of clothes in a JDA locker for these occasions. If she arrived at work in the same clothes as yesterday, her colleagues would tease her about having an overnight date. Wasn't that sexual harassment?

"Wait, isn't it Saturday?" I asked. "You're going to the office?"

Naruse washed down a bite of bread with a gulp of coffee. "Thanks to a certain party called D-Powers, I have to work this weekend," she retorted with a smile.

Oh, sorry about that.

"And what are you two planning on doing?" Naruse asked.

"Whatever do you mean?" I replied. "We're going to acquire the orb for

tomorrow, of course.”

When I sat down at the dining table, Miyoshi brought me a drink and some toast.

“Speaking of which, people have started calling D-Powers ‘orb hunters’ as of late,” Naruse said. “Every day, the JDA receives quite a few requests from people wanting to meet with you.”

“Huh?” I responded. “I really don’t want to deal with that! Like at all!”

“Normally, if explorers don’t want their contact info made public, the JDA won’t help outsiders get in contact with them.”

“Well, if we fire the JDA as our mediators, they won’t make any money from our trades.”

“Yes, that *is* one part of it.”

Dodging the issue, Naruse tried to feign nonchalance, nibbling on a piece of bread smeared with butter and marmalade.

Looks like I hit the nail on the head.

Still, her saying “normally” had scared me. In that case, it was possible for the JDA to take “abnormal” actions. And lately, Miyoshi had become quite famous.

Either way, we hadn’t necessarily returned to hide. When we’d first announced the auction, our home phone had been ringing off the hook. Yet now...

Wait, is the cable still disconnected?

“Don’t worry about the phone,” Miyoshi said. “I only set it up for registration purposes. All important communications come through our cell phones, right? And if random people start calling me on my cell, I’ll block each and every one of them.”

“Why not let it go to voice mail?” I asked.

“If I’m not going to listen to the voice mail in the first place, simply blocking them will save me a whole lot of time and trouble. Any necessary calls will come to my cell phone, and if someone I *don’t* know has an important message,

they'll come visit us." At this, Miyoshi huffed indignantly. "Plus, listening to all those messages would take the entire day."

Yeah, I suppose so.

I then turned to give Naruse a warning. "About yesterday. If you can bring inscription-related photos and documents out of the JDA, it would be best to only do your translations at this office. We even have guards here, after a fashion."

"Guards?" Naruse repeated.

"I'll give you the details later. And there's something I'd like to ask you about that too."

I wanted Naruse's opinion on how we should deal with the Arthurs. However, since things would be busy until we finished handing over Otherworldly Language Comprehension, we could save that discussion for later.

Despite looking puzzled, Naruse nodded. "Understood. Since the photos themselves aren't classified, that shouldn't be a problem."

"Also, we already have what I assume will be the main event," I said. "If it's not too much trouble, I'd like you to translate that document as soon as possible. Either tonight or tomorrow."

"The main event? Are you talking about what I saw in that video...?"

"Yep. The grimoire from the Wandering Manor. The excerpt from *The Book of Wanderers*."

Telling Naruse its official name wouldn't be a problem. Like all other items, you could learn the grimoire's name by touching it. And it was called *The Book of Wanderers (Fragment One)*.

Still, if this turns out to be some sort of preface, that would be a real letdown.

As Naruse began to say something, the doorbell rang.

"Oh," Miyoshi said. "I called Secret Agent Tanaka this morning, so that might be him. But wow, he got here fast." While peering at the monitor, her tone changed to one of surprise. "Looks like it's Tanaka and...Simon?"

“Now that’s an odd combo,” I said.



After having Miyoshi open the gate, I stood up and headed towards the front door.

“Good morning,” Tanaka greeted me. “I apologize for coming so early.”

“Good morning,” I replied. “Why are you two here together?”

“We didn’t come together. We simply met by coincidence at the gate.”

“I see...”

“Hey there, Yoshimura,” Simon said in English. “We’re the ones who won the prize, so our boss asked us to come check things out.”

“I don’t know what ‘prize’ you’re talking about, but if you’re referring to the auction, the handoff is supposed to be tomorrow.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but—”

“Excuse me,” Tanaka interrupted, also speaking English. “I have urgent business here. Can you save this conversation for later?”

“Y-Yeah,” Simon replied. “My bad.”

Despite looking like an ordinary, middle-aged man, Tanaka sometimes radiated immense pressure.

“Miyoshi, hand them over to Tanaka in the back,” I said.

“You got it!” she answered.

“Well then, you can circle around to the back from there,” I said to Tanaka.

“Will you be okay on your own?”

Tanaka glanced towards the station wagon parked at the gate. “In that case, would it be all right if I took my car directly to the back?”

“Sure.”

After signaling to the station wagon, Tanaka walked around back.

“That dude’s weirdly intense,” Simon noted, looking at the back of our favorite secret agent. “Who is he, exactly?”

“No idea,” I replied.

"Huh?"

"He seems to be someone important from the government who's keeping an eye on us... But I don't know the particulars."

"Keeping an eye on you, huh? You two are as relaxed as ever."

"Against all the evidence, we Japanese people choose to believe that the world is a peaceful place."

Simon looked around at the plants surrounding the house. *"And yet I'm sensing something deadly around here."*

As expected of a top explorer, he had sharp instincts. That was the Arthurs' territory.

"Must be your imagination," I said. *"So, did you come just to check on us today?"*

"Nah, I'm here to act as your guard for tomorrow. My boss is on pins and needles about the whole thing."

The Dungeon Strike Force was under the US president's direct control. By boss, did he mean *the* commander in chief?

"Are you talking about the president?" I asked for confirmation.

"Yeah, suppose I am. He'd be really upset if the orb was stolen during the delivery."

"Delivery? Until we see the cipher, we won't even know who the winning bidder is. Plus, the handoff is still more than twenty-four hours away. There's nothing here right now."

Simon stared down at me intently. But to be fair, the guy was so tall that he couldn't help but look down on me.

"Well, let's leave it at that," he said with a small shrug. *"But anyway, I'll probably be hanging around here for the rest of the day. Try not to let it bother you."*

"Seriously?" I asked. *"But Miyoshi and I are going out."*

"Well, think of me as a bodyguard and look the other way."

“My bodyguard isn’t going to attack me, right?”

Laughing uproariously, Simon slapped me on the shoulder. *“Good one! You a comedian?”*

Ouch, that hurts, Simon! You have some of the world’s highest stats! Show a little restraint!

“Okay, I understand, but...the two of us lead pretty normal lives,” I insisted.

“No doubt,” Simon replied, turning around and walking away. *“See ya later then.”*

This is gonna be trouble.

“Was that Simon Gershwin just now?”

“Whoa!” I cried.

Before I knew it, Tanaka was standing right beside me. This guy could sneak up on anyone.

“Don’t startle me like that,” I said. *“But yes, that was the DSF’s top explorer.”*

“My apologies,” Tanaka replied. *“But why was he here? Are you two acquaintances?”*

“If you look up his ID, I’m sure you’ll figure it out, but he’s won several of our auctions. I got to know him during the handoffs.”

“Interesting. And here I thought he was coming here to buy an orb directly.”

“Not a chance. In that case, I would be giving the orb directly to the DSF. Even if you try to cover up these transactions, the WDA monitors the flow of money around all dungeon-related items.”

“Indeed,” Tanaka confirmed. *“If D-Powers transferred any money to someone in Simon’s circle, the WDA would know at once.”*

“That’s what I thought. So, who’s the person we captured?”

“He’s probably from some intelligence agency. But how on earth did you manage to apprehend him?”

“When he let his guard down, we just pounced on him, I guess.”

Tanaka looked somewhat disappointed. “Pounced on him, eh? You’re proving your mettle as an explorer. Hard to believe you’re only G-Ranked.”

“Oh, it was just a coincidence. Speaking of which, I thought our house was being guarded. Was that not the case?”

Tanaka’s eyebrow twitched upwards. “Hmph,” he grunted, saying nothing more.

Uh, what? Was the Security Bureau actually guarding us, but these guys slipped past them? Crap. That might’ve been the wrong thing to say.

At that moment, Naruse opened the door to leave. “I’m heading out, Yoshimura. I’ll be back later.”

“Oh, see you later then.”

After nodding to Tanaka, Naruse headed towards the gate.

“What’s a JDA employee doing here so early in the morning?” Tanaka asked.

“Naruse’s our full-time supervisor,” I said. “She was organizing our exploration info until late last night.”

“I see. She’s quite the hard worker. Well then, we’re heading out now as well. If anything else comes up, feel free to contact me.”

“Oh, of course. Thank you very much.”

While standing at the entrance, I watched the station wagon drive away from the gate.

“Everyone we’re dealing with is pretty formidable, aren’t they?” Miyoshi asked, peeking her head out.

“No arguments there. I bet the surrounding buildings are filled with intelligence agencies from all across the world.”

“I’m positively trembling in my boots! What if a sniper tries to shoot us?” Miyoshi dramatically carried on with a smile in her voice, pretty much unafraid and making a show of it.

“The Arthurs did defend us from arrows, but bullets are much faster,” I pointed out. “Do you think those hounds can deal with them?”

In response, I felt as though I heard a short bark from somewhere.

Miyoshi laughed. “That sounded like ‘Leave it to me’!”

“How reassuring.”

“He also said, ‘We accept payment in the form of magic crystals’.”

“Oh no, I’m positively trembling in my boots.”

If I couldn’t find a favorite food of theirs soon, I really was going to have to collect magic crystals myself. If that happened, our master-servant relationship would be flipped. Then, it would only be a matter of time until the Arthurs had me fighting a battle royale for the Holy Grail. Perhaps I could rely on the power of the yen to prevent this.

“Miyoshi, are magic crystals bought and sold?” I asked.

“Yes, for research purposes,” she replied.

This might be my lucky day.

“Magic crystals might have been branded ‘clean plutonium’,” Miyoshi continued, “but at this point, no one has managed to extract energy from them.”

Apparently, you couldn’t control the speed of the energy’s extraction. Once you began the process, the reaction would accelerate in a flash. Thus, all the energy would be released within a single moment.

“Sounds like that would cause a huge explosion,” I said.

“Yes, but even after its instantaneous release, the energy doesn’t turn into heat or light. From what I’ve heard, it becomes something else.”

“Something else? Does that mean it’s *not* energy?”

Dungeon physics made absolutely no sense.

“It must turn into D-Factor—the hypothetical ‘dungeon energy.’ I mean, the origin of our universe is subatomic particles being created from energy, right?”

“How much energy do you think these magic crystals produce, exactly?” I asked with a chuckle. “But in that case, there can’t be much of a demand yet. Could you research the market value for me?”

“No problem.” Miyoshi suddenly smiled, as if she’d remembered something. “Bet no one would ever guess that we’re buying them as pet treats.”

That coaxed a smile from me as well. “You’re right about that.”

I then walked back into the office. It was December first. The only day in which we could acquire the orb—or so everyone thought, at least—had just begun.

Message Board: [Too Vast] Yoyo-D 1356 [Might Get Lost]

182. Anonymous Explorer

Hey! Has anyone looked at the JDA's Yoyo D Information Bureau?

183. Anonymous Explorer

You mean the dungeon information page? I used to look at it in the past, but not so much nowadays. The news is pretty dull and unoriginal, right?

184. Anonymous Explorer

Seriously, what's up with that video? Is it the trailer for some movie? Did anyone see the word "advertisement" written in small print anywhere?

185. Anonymous Explorer

Huh? What's this about a video? Did something interesting get uploaded?

186. Anonymous Explorer

Go watch it and come back. It's a must-see.

187. Anonymous Explorer

>182 Yeah, I saw it! BASED!

Where was that? The tenth level, right?

188. Anonymous Explorer

It was that good, huh? All right, I'll go take a look too!

189. Anonymous Explorer

>187 Yeah, I think it's the tenth level. When they're approaching the mansion in the first scene, there's a graveyard all around them.

On the other hand, First Lieutenant Kimitsu and other top explorers from around the world have been seen at Yoyogi since the middle of last month. So, this could be a new level after the twenty-first.

190. Anonymous Explorer

The number on the gatepost when the "Wandering Manor" subtitle pops up is cool as hell. I've gotta say, this looks like a work of fiction based on the dungeons.

191. Anonymous Explorer

>190 For real.

The part where they walk through the gate and those gargoyles turn in their direction is straight out of a movie. Stop staring at me!

192. Anonymous Explorer

They must've been pretty brave to keep going forward.

193. Anonymous Explorer

Plenty of explorers aiming for the lower levels have more than a few screws loose.

194. Anonymous Explorer

Since you're on this board, aren't you one of them?

195. Anonymous Explorer

That huge raven has serious presence.

196. Anonymous Explorer

When the door opens, the cameraperson turns around in a panic, and the raven is grooming its feathers on the gatepost. The deliberate close-up in the editing made me laugh.

197. Anonymous Explorer

Lol is that why the video is so blurry there?

198. Anonymous Explorer

I saw the video too! So cool! The lack of audio is a bit disappointing though.

199. Anonymous Explorer

It's probably because the people filming screamed their heads off. Especially towards the end.

200. Anonymous Explorer

>189 The monsters coming out of the room were skeletal executioners, right? Those have never been seen on the tenth level.

201. Anonymous Explorer

Until now, the mansion itself hadn't been discovered either.

202. Anonymous Explorer

Listen to this. Around midnight on the twenty-seventh of last month, an acquaintance of mine heard a bell ringing on the tenth level. We all made fun of him for hearing things, but maybe this is connected?

203. Anonymous Explorer

Seriously?

204. Anonymous Explorer

During the final part in the room, the cameraperson suddenly looks up upwards. If you imagine a bell ringing there, it kind of fits.

205. Anonymous Explorer

That's when the room starts warping, right?

206. Anonymous Explorer

What was your acquaintance even doing on the tenth floor in the middle of the night? No one in their right mind would do that.

207. Anonymous Explorer

Apparently, his party failed to make it back to the eighth level, and they were camping out on the stairs between the ninth and tenth level.

208. Anonymous Explorer

Sounds like one hell of a lousy team.

209. Anonymous Explorer

Hey, no need to be so harsh. So, what else did he say about the bell? Did his party go look?

210. Anonymous Explorer

When I asked him the same question, he got pissed and yelled, "Who the hell would walk around the tenth level at night?!"

211. Anonymous Explorer

...Yeah, that sounds about right.

212. Anonymous Explorer

Agreed.

213. Anonymous Explorer

During the last part, the attacking gargoyles get blown away. What happened there?

214. Anonymous Explorers

Didn't the cameraperson's friend blast them with gunfire?

215. Anonymous Explorer

In that case, they're definitely an SDF squadron.

216. Anonymous Explorer

Iori's number one in our hearts and on the field!

217. Anonymous

The ending was basically a freakout video.

Those eyeballs were real-life Hiyo from *Ushio & Tora*. They're going to haunt my dreams.

218. Anonymous Explorer

Is this a gore video?!

219. Anonymous Explorer

Sort of, but it's more horror than gore.

220. Anonymous Explorer

I wonder what was on that pedestal in the middle of the room.

221. Anonymous Explorer

Oh, that “Wanderers, behold the wisdom of the true grimoire” part?

222. Anonymous Explorer

I feel like the actual writing on the pedestal was longer than that...

223. Anonymous Explorer

They probably abbreviated it for the subtitles. Unlike the inscriptions, it was written in a language from Earth. Someone will translate the whole thing.

224. Anonymous Explorer

Is the “wanderers” part in reference to us?

225. Wandering Explorer ID: P12xx-xxxx-xxxx-0192

Changed our names to “Wandering Explorer.”

226. Wandering Explorer

The info page on the Wandering Manor has been made public!

227. Wandering Explorer

Huh, seriously?

228. Wandering Explorer

Wait, you have to kill 373 of the same type of monster in a single day for it to appear? Is that even possible?

229. Wandering Explorer

Maybe if you went for the first-floor slimes...

230. Wandering Explorer

>229 Slimes are surprisingly hard to kill. Although there certainly are enough of them.

If you're not careful, killing one slime could take five minutes.

So, if you defeated twelve per hour, that would add up to 240 in twenty hours... May God be with you.

231. Wandering Explorer

According to the website, the mansion appeared after they killed 373 zombies.

232. Wandering Explorer

What the hell?! That's the *real* horror movie!

233. Wandering Explorer

What is this, an arcade game...? Team I sure is incredible.

234. Wandering Explorer

So, we've all decided this was Iori's team?

235. Wandering Explorer

I can't think of any other options. Shibu T, maybe?

236. Wandering Explorer

Would they be loitering around the tenth level...?

237. Wandering Explorer

And they "think" the mansion will cease to exist when the day ends? Lmao that's the kind of reporting I expect from Tokyo Sports, where everything but the date is wrong.

>236 This isn't necessarily the tenth level.

238. Wandering Explorer

I suppose they're admitting to not knowing very much. And if I had to guess, no one else will do a follow-up investigation.

239. Wandering Explorer

No one could even if they wanted to.

>237 Doesn't the presence of zombies mean this is the tenth level?

240. Wandering Explorer

I look forward to the beautiful Iori's next announcement!

241. Wandering Explorer

Hear, hear!

Yoyogi Dungeon

“So, we’re immediately heading to the dungeon?” Miyoshi asked.

After entering Yoyogi Dungeon at an early hour, we immediately took the shortest route to the lower levels. Today, there would be no need to throw off our pursuers.

“Well, I mean, we need to acquire Otherworldly Language Comprehension *today*, right?” I replied.

“I suppose so, but...are we really going to the ninth level?”

Since we’d already spent consecutive days within the dungeon, Miyoshi spoke as if this were a huge bother.

Honestly, it’s a pain in the ass for me too.

“Yep,” I said. “The other day, we showed our pursuers around the tenth level. So now, I’d like to introduce them to the colonial worms on the ninth level.”

“You’ve never even had the pleasure of meeting those worms yourself,” Miyoshi pointed out.

“Well, I’ve seen videos of them. No need to get hung up on the details. Still, if I met one of those things for real, I’d be dead on the spot—no doubt about it.”

“And yet you’re leading other people right to them? How demonic can you get?”

Miyoshi furrowed her brow as if to criticize my cruelty. Even so, she couldn’t hide her smile.

“Also,” I said. “If we have every team hunt the colonial worms, it might drop that item we talked about earlier. The one that’s something like a stomach.”

Colonial worms were the prime example of “monsters that no one hunted.” In other words, not enough of them had been exterminated to determine their drop items. Since we probably wouldn’t get a second chance at this, I would use our pursuers to hunt them to the brink of extinction.

“You’re sending people to their deaths to determine drop items?” Miyoshi

asked. "How cruel."

"That grin plastered across your face makes you an accomplice. But anyway, everyone should be fine. So long as there are teams capable of mounting suppressing fire head-on."

"Do soldiers on scouting missions usually have light support weapons?"

"They can make do with their assault rifles," I said.

"Sounds like they'll run out of bullets in an instant."

Magazines contain thirty rounds, right? If they fire on automatic, they'll exhaust their ammunition almost at once. Even with three magazines.

If anyone died, that would leave a bad taste in my mouth. At the same time, information about the ninth level had been made public. Any exploration team that chased us to such a deep level wouldn't die so easily.

They might end up traumatized though.

I needed to move quickly so that the teams had plenty of time to hunt on the ninth level. We only had twenty-four hours left, after all.

"But if I move too fast, they won't be able to follow me," I said.

"Imagine a G-Ranked party leaving a scouting team in the dust," Miyoshi replied. "On a simple route, no less. That would be another problem entirely."

She was right. On a more complicated route, low-ranked explorers *might* have been able to leave behind pros for a single second. However, accomplishing this on a standard route with no obstacles would certainly be strange.

I continued running at a pace slightly faster than normal, making sure that I had a Life Detection "string" attached to our pursuers. Yet because we paid no attention to monsters, this was pretty quick for inside a dungeon. Hopefully, our pursuers would interpret this as the foolhardiness of beginners.

"We completely led them around by the nose the other day," I said.

"Considering that, I thought their personnel would have doubled. Looks like it hasn't though."

"Doubling the number of foreign explorers in a single day would be difficult,"

Miyoshi replied. “All the more so if you needed those with special training.”

That made sense. If a large number of those soldiers existed, their armies would have dispatched them from the beginning.

As we descended several levels, I noticed the same type of people always standing around the bottom of the stairs.

“Miyoshi, have you noticed anything?” I asked.

While walking in the lead, Miyoshi turned her head to face me, wearing a curious expression. “Noticed what?”

“The people standing around each time we descend to a new level.”

“That’s not too odd. We’re not very deep yet.”

I placed a hand to my jaw, assuming a thinking pose. “No, those aren’t normal explorers.”

“Then what are they?”

“Surveillance personnel, most likely.”

In each party, one member had been carrying a large backpack. Those reeked of communication devices. After chasing us around the other day and being thoroughly manipulated, the Japanese soldiers seemed to have changed their line of thinking.

“But if they don’t follow us, they won’t be able to act as our guards,” Miyoshi said.

“The ones trying to guard us were probably the Security Bureau,” I replied. “These groups seem more military.”

“In that case, they’re probably...”

“The SDF, I’d guess.”

If their mission wasn’t to guard us directly, their true goal must have been to verify which floor Otherworldly Language Comprehension dropped on. And since we’d found only one group at the entrance and exit of each floor, those must have been the most effective locations to take up watch.

“We’re seeing firsthand the strength of organizations that can deploy

personnel at a moment's notice," I said.

"Well then, shall we disguise ourselves?"

"Listen here," I said in exasperation. "What purpose would that serve?"

In the end, people knowing what floor we were on wouldn't mean much of anything. Even so, the idea of "fleeing" and "throwing people off our scent" had overexcited Miyoshi. As a result, she'd already lost sight of our true goal.

"This isn't tag or hide-and-seek," I pointed out.

"Seriously? Then what are we even doing here?"

"Wait, what *are* we doing here...?"

Pretending we've come to acquire the orb, maybe? Or acting as though we're delivering it to another explorer inside the dungeon, perhaps?

"Hmm," I mused. "We're pretending to be receiving the orb from another explorer, I guess?"

"Oh, is that why you're approaching the people we cross paths with more than usual?" Miyoshi asked.

"Yep."

The more people we came into contact with, the harder it would be for our pursuers to narrow down a target.

"But in that case, shouldn't we wander around a higher level with more people around?" Miyoshi asked.

She was exactly right. Now that I thought about it, there was no reason for us to descend to the ninth level.

"Well, wanting revenge plays a small factor in this decision," I admitted.

Being constantly monitored felt pretty gross. Basically, I wanted to get back at those Peeping Toms.

"So to sum things up, you're just acting like a child?" Miyoshi asked.

"Wow. You could've sugarcoated that a little."

While joking around, we approached passing explorers, sometimes veering

from the path in ways that seemed meaningful. Despite all this, we still reached the eighth level at a rather quick pace.

As the Russian team followed D-Powers down to the eighth level, the number of other explorers dropped dramatically. In Yoyogi, the forest environment began on the fifth level and continued until the end of the eighth level. Furthermore, the eighth level served as the barrier to becoming a starting professional. At this stage, blood bears increased in density, and even hellhounds began to appear. Due to these factors, the eighth level tended to have a small number of explorers except around the entrance and exit.

“It’s high time we took care of them,” one of the Russian soldiers said to his team.

He walked to the side, wearing the same equipment as the other five men. Their goal was to eliminate the targets or prevent them from obtaining the orb. The latter would require monitoring the targets until they came into possession of the item. Thus, the former option would be far less difficult to accomplish.

The Russian team could sense another three groups around them at all times. However, these units seemed more interested in knowing what floor the targets would descend to. Rather than making direct contact with D-Powers, the other groups took a shortcut, aiming for the stairs leading to the ninth level.

The rest of the team nodded in response to the man’s words. In order to surround D-Powers, they broke off into three-man cells, increasing their speed all the while.

“Hmm?” I said. “It feels like something’s coming.”

“What do you mean by ‘something’?” Miyoshi asked.

Three of the four groups following us took a shortcut, trying to come out ahead of us. These teams were probably trying to figure out which floor we were on. If they arrived at the ninth level stairs first, and we didn’t pass through, they would know we were active on the eighth level. In all likelihood, this tactic had been devised in response to their fruitless pursuits the other day.

However, the last team's movements were different.

"Looks like one of the groups following us got impatient," I explained.

They were rapidly closing the distance between us.

"There are six of them in total," I continued. "And when they put their backs into it, they can move pretty fast. Should've expected that."

While out of our sight, the team split into two groups of three, spreading out to trap us in a pincer formation.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Miyoshi asked. "The Arthurs will take care of it."

Apparently, Cavall and Aethlem were already on the move.

"They sensed strong-willed people—probably enemies—heading towards us," Miyoshi explained. "That got them all riled up."

"Does that mean we won't have a chance to shine ourselves?" I asked.

"Probably."

Suddenly, the Russian soldier moving at the front of the group disappeared. Since there was no warning, none of his comrades could be sure what had actually happened.

"What?"

The two remaining soldiers stopped running and huddled beside a tree. Despite examining the area, they sensed nothing above, below, or around them.

"Did you see what happened?"

"No. He just disappeared right before my eyes."

That being said, people didn't just vanish out of nowhere. Even if the enemy had used a silent weapon, a corpse would have remained.

Forcing himself to remain calm, one of the soldiers used a wireless radio to call the man who'd disappeared. No response. He then tried to contact the

other team—which had circled around in the opposite direction—to relay the situation. However...

“Why is no one answering?!” he cried out.

“Hard to imagine all the radios breaking down at the same time,” his comrade responded.

In other words, there was only one possible explanation.

“Are you saying that the other team was completely wiped out?”

The man’s comrade nodded silently.

“That’s insane...”

Having said this, the man looked around the area once more. At that moment, he heard a thudding sound from behind him. When he spun around, his comrade had disappeared, and the automatic rifle he’d been carrying lay on the ground.

“H-Hey! You’re not being funny!”

The man shouted at a volume unbecoming of his position. Nevertheless, nothing but silence enveloped the area.

“Y-You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

His team had received the greatest training soldiers could have. He shouldn’t have been this powerless. Allowing one of his comrades to disappear without even glimpsing the enemy shouldn’t have been possible.

As the man stood in one place, completely dumbfounded, he suddenly heard the panting of death. Then, he felt a lukewarm exhalation on the nape of his neck. Startled, the man whipped around, and darkness enveloped him.

“So, what should we do with them?” Miyoshi asked.

Looking at the six men lying in front of us like corpses, I groaned. “Yeah, I have no idea.”

At this point in time, only one organization would actually attack us. These men probably belonged to that group.

“They’re alive, right?” I asked.

“They should be fine, but based on the people we captured at the office, they probably won’t wake up for half a day.”

Since each level of the dungeon was a separate pocket dimension, we couldn’t move them across floors using the Arthurs’ shadow pit. As a result, carrying them home would be difficult, and right now, I couldn’t even contact Secret Agent Tanaka.

“Let’s quietly throw them somewhere inconspicuous,” I suggested. “Like behind the pork skewer stall.”

They probably wouldn’t be attacked by monsters there.

“Woof, woof,” Cavall barked at Miyoshi.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“Carrying this much weight will be difficult for them,” she replied.

“Well, we can’t put them in Storage, but...”

For the time being, we disarmed the soldiers, placing all their belongings in Storage. Even so, we could do nothing about the people themselves.

“We’re counting on you guys for the rest,” I said to the Arthurs.

“Ruff, ruff.”

“He’ll take the job for six magic crystals,” Miyoshi translated.

“One crystal for each soldier carried, huh? Hold on. That’s not six crystals for each of you, right?”

In an attempt to dodge the issue, Cavall averted his gaze from me, whining into Miyoshi’s ear.

“They can make do with two crystals per hellhound,” she said.

“That’s still an increase! Eh, whatever. Get going, you guys.”

Barking in unison, the Arthurs disappeared into the shadows. At the same time, the row of six men vanished. The hellhounds would be heading for an inconspicuous place in the community near the eighth level exit.

“Wow, it’s been one thing after another since this morning!” Miyoshi cried.

“True,” I agreed. “We’ve finally made it this far, but the real work is just beginning.”

We then descended to the ninth level, leading our pursuers to an area where colonial worms frequently appeared. After wandering around there for a while, I began moving at full speed, acting as though I’d completed our mission and lost our tails. Before long, we returned to the surface. The people watching us from around the stairs of each level had probably seen this.

By all means, keep looking for the orb on the ninth level!

Since our pursuers were all high-leveled, I couldn’t see them getting injured there. The psychological damage would be immense, though.

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

“We’re home!” I called out.

When I opened the door to our office, an excited Naruse raced over to us, her face slightly flushed.

“Yoshimura!” she cried. “L-L-L-Look at this! Please!”

She was gripping a copy of the fragment we’d found at the mansion.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’ve discovered something huge!”

After leaving this morning, Naruse had used the WDA’s public database to download as many photographs of inscriptions and their properties as possible onto a memory card. These “properties” included the dungeon and floor where the inscriptions appeared as well as the names of collectors.

Afraid of being caught, Naruse had downloaded everything from a wireless public LAN. That impressed me. If she’d left a huge number of access records from a JDA line right before Heaven’s Leaks went public, that would have looked incredibly suspicious. Yet even if you traced the logs, you couldn’t easily identify who had used a public wireless LAN.

Suppose someone used a wireless LAN without authorization or accessed a database from a public wireless LAN. In order to apprehend the criminal, police would have to analyze the logs, identify the location of use, and stake out any areas of repeated use. The Metropolitan PD had even included this in their report from their Integrated Security Measures Conference. They must have found this sort of investigation quite exhilarating. I could definitely sympathize with that.

After finishing the download, Naruse had returned to the office to begin translating. At that time, she'd also remembered receiving this copy of the fragment from Miyoshi. And since we'd asked her to translate this quickly, she'd worked on it first.

"This fragment explains how to form a party!" Naruse exclaimed.

"Don't you just...submit a form to the JDA with your name and ID?" I asked.

"Th-Th-This is different!"

Apparently, this fragment described how to form a party using the "dungeon system." It also described the effects of doing so. These were the benefits of using your D-Card to form a party: One, you could vaguely intuit the location of all party members, even if they weren't nearby.

Two, you could check the "health" of all party members. This was probably in reference to HP and MP.

Three, all party members could communicate with each other using telepathy. The range for this was twenty meters.

Four, the leader could decide the XP division rate between all registered members.

"What do you think of the range being twenty meters?" I asked Miyoshi. "Is twenty the thirteenth of something?"

"If so, it's probably a Harshad number," she said, immediately looking something up on the PC.

"What's that?"

Miyoshi launched into an explanation. "They're natural numbers in which the

sum of all digits is a divisor for the original number. Take twenty, for instance. Two plus zero equals two, and two is a divisor for twenty. And twenty is this the thirteenth Harshad number.”

“And what does the name ‘Harshad’ mean?” I asked.

“Apparently, it means ‘to give joy’ in Sanskrit. An Indian mathematician thought up these numbers.”

“I see. So in other words, telepathy brings the party joy?”

Shrewd as ever, these dungeons.

After listening to our exchange, Naruse finally spoke up, killing the momentum. “Um, is this really what we should be focusing on right now?”

“All right then, should we give it a shot?” I asked.

I took out my D-Card, taking extra care to hide the front side from Naruse. To form a party, everyone who wanted to become a member had to touch their cards together. Afterwards, the prospective leader just had to think “admit” in English.

Upon thinking this word, I felt as though a strange connection had been born between Miyoshi and me.

“Did it work?” I asked.

Seems like it, Miyoshi replied telepathically.

“Whoa!” I yelped in surprise, looking up at her.

In response to all this, Naruse watched us curiously.

“Did you hear that just now?” I asked her.

Naruse frowned. “You just asked ‘Did it work?’ Right?”

Apparently, anyone outside of the party couldn’t hear the telepathy. That was convenient.

“Looks like the telepathy was a success,” I replied.

After hearing this, Naruse also took out her D-Card, looking eager to use it. “W-Will you test it out on me too?”

“No problem,” I said.

While touching Naruse’s D-Card, I thought the word “admit” in English. Just like with Miyoshi, I felt a connection being established between us.

Probably feeling the same thing, Naruse gazed at our touching cards with a curious expression. “What was that?”

How’s this? I asked telepathically.

“Wh-Whoa!” she squealed. “Did you just send me a thought?”

“Seems like it,” I answered normally.

At that moment, Naruse furrowed her brow, speaking a little uneasily. “But...what if this conveys everything we think?”

“We’ll be forced to hear all of Kei’s dirty thoughts!” Miyoshi cried.

What the hell are you saying, Miyoshi?!

“O-Objection!” I fired back. “I don’t even have dirty thoughts! And while we’re at it, keep your gluttonous fantasies out of my head!”

“Wait, how did you know I’m hungry? Does that mean our thoughts are leaking?!”

Did either of you hear what I just thought? Naruse asked telepathically.

“Huh?!” Miyoshi and I shouted simultaneously.

In response to Naruse’s sudden question, we both turned towards her.

“Nope, didn’t hear a thing,” I said.

“Nothing came into my head either,” Miyoshi agreed.

“From the looks of it, thoughts are only sent when you’re actively trying to use telepathy,” Naruse explained. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

So, Naruse stayed calm and tested things out for herself, did she? Gah! Now the two of us look like idiots!

“But Kei, why is the command in English?” Miyoshi asked.

“Admit, huh...?” I repeated the word in the language apparently required for it.

Yeah, that's a good point.

Usually, the text on D-Cards was displayed in the native language of the person looking at it. Even so, the keywords were mostly English. Also, when Miyoshi had Appraised items, English titles had been written beside the Japanese.

"Maybe English is the native language of the dungeon creator?" I suggested.

"That's absurd," Naruse blurted out.

Well, yeah. If anyone seriously claimed that a native English speaker created the dungeons, of course their sanity would be called into question.

"Or maybe it's because English has the most speakers in the world," Miyoshi suggested instead.

Sure, that's the safer answer. But still...

"Wouldn't that be Chinese?" I asked.

"Oh, right," Miyoshi replied. "Probably."

"Speaking of which, where is Area 1 located?"

Naruse answered this without delay. "Since it's between 100 and 120 degrees west longitude, it's mostly located in the western edge of North America. In the US, that includes Los Angeles and Las Vegas. In Canada, that includes Calgary and Edmonton."

JDA employees sure know their stuff.

"Then maybe it's because Area 1 is the epicenter of the dungeons," I said.

Miyoshi offered a rebuttal to this. "But lately, there's been a lot of discussion about Area 0 being found in the polar regions, right?"

Yeah, I think I heard some news about that.

"That's right," Naruse confirmed. "An Inuit man acquired an Area 0 card in Canada."

"Oh, really?" I asked. "Still, there must be a good reason for all this English somewhere..."

What was the secret behind all these important elements being in a single language?

In a highly advanced civilization, a unified language on a planetary scale might become commonplace. For example, if Japanese people settled a new planet and expanded across the entire globe, our language could become the worldwide mode of speech. Even after tens of thousands of years, it wouldn't be strange for the same language to be in use across the entire planet.

So, what if the civilization on the other side of the dungeons was this advanced? Those beings might have mistaken the first language they came into contact with for Earth's *only* language.

I explained these thoughts to Miyoshi and Naruse.

"But if that's the case, how would you explain D-Cards changing to the viewer's native language?" Miyoshi asked.

"Hmm," I mused, folding my arms and looking upwards. "Perhaps the text is being transmitted directly into the viewer's brain and fed back to their visual perception. That's the mostly likely explanation. Still, that doesn't explain why the party command is in English."

"No matter how much we rack our brains, we're not going to come to a conclusion now."

"You're right about that, but... Wait, you're the one who brought this up!"

Giggling, Miyoshi stuck out her tongue and fled to Naruse's side.

I've always heard that pets and owners are similar. She's acting exactly like the Arthurs.

Naruse ignored our behavior, bringing up another topic. "So, what's this last part about XP division rates?"

"Based on the wording, here's what I think," I said. "While you're in a party, the team collectively earns experience points, and the leader can decide how to distribute those points among the members."

"Experience points!" Naruse shouted, her eyes glittering. "So they do exist! And statuses too!"

This inscription had also mentioned there being “items and skills that affected the entire party’s statuses.” Of course she’d come to this conclusion.

People had assumed that the rankings were based on something like XP, but its actual existence had never been proven. After all, humans naturally accumulated experience. Thus, the reason for someone feeling stronger after dungeon diving had been a matter of debate. Had this been the result of normal experience? Or had this person gained mysterious powers through the acquisition of something like video game XP? Regardless, a normal accumulation of experience couldn’t explain the absurd strength of top explorers. This had led many people to believe in the existence of XP, if only indirectly.

“But how do you set up the distribution rate?” I asked.

I didn’t think that a control window similar to Making’s would pop up.

“Oh, that was written in the fragment,” Naruse answered. “You use the back of your D-Card.”

“Really?”

Flipping over my D-Card, I found a list of party members displayed there, which Naruse peered down at.

Oh crap! I shouted telepathically.

“Huh?” she asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Oh, um, no...”

The thought of her glimpsing my rank and skills had caused me to panic, but fortunately, she could only see the back.

Don’t go leaking my thoughts like that, Telepathy.

“Err, well...” I continued. “Your face being so close to mine caused me to panic a little.”

Jeez, what an overreaction, I thought after coming up with this poor excuse. *What am I, a soccer player hamming up a broken ankle after getting brushed on the shoulder?*

Miyoshi came to back me up with a knowing look. “You’re such a child, Kei.”

At this, Naruse turned a little red. “Oh, I see...”

“W-Well, putting that aside,” I said. “Looks like the back of my D-Card does have a list of party members.”

“Oh, so does mine,” Miyoshi chimed in. “I wonder if the ‘33.3’ after each name is a percentage.”

Being the leader, I was at the top of the list, but no distribution percentage had been written beside my name. According to the inscription, the leader decided the distribution rate for all party members, only taking the remainder. To update these values, the leader only had to touch the party member’s rate and think something like “twenty percent.” Afterwards, the card would reflect the new number. Likewise, the percentages would be reset if the leader thought “equal division.”

“Since we mostly understand how this works, let’s disband the party for now,” I said.

Activating the telepathy on accident and relaying something unfavorable to Naruse would be a huge problem. Until we grew accustomed to this, we would need to exercise caution.

Disbanding the party was similar to adding a member. The leader simply touched their D-Card and thought “dismiss” in English. To remove a single member, the leader would touch that person’s name, and to disband the whole party, the leader would touch their own name.

Still, the D-Card can tell which person is being selected simply by touch? What a convenient design.

“Now we just need to know the maximum number of party members,” I said.

“Oh, that was in the fragment,” Naruse replied. “Eight people seems to be the limit.”

“Eight, huh? Sounds pretty normal.”

Since eight was smaller than thirteen, it couldn’t be the thirteenth of some sequence. Not unless that sequence increased and decreased.

“The name display area on the back looks like it only fits eight rows,” Miyoshi said with a laugh. “That must be the reason for the eight-person limit.”

Despite her joking tone, that might have been the correct answer.

“Also,” Miyoshi continued. “I’m curious about what would happen if a person already in a party tried to create another one of their own.”

“Since there are three of us here, why don’t we test it out?” I asked.

First, Miyoshi created a party with Naruse as a member. Afterwards, I made Miyoshi a member of my party, and in turn, Miyoshi made Naruse a member of my party as well. As it turned out, both things were possible. A person could join two parties, and a subordinate member could add another teammate.

Furthermore, when a party member had a team of their own, the characters “P2” would appear after their name on the parent party card. And on the member’s card, the characters “R1” would appear before their own name.

“Does this ‘P’ stand for ‘party’?” Miyoshi asked. “As in this member has a party of their own?”

“Probably,” I replied. “It could also mean ‘parent’.”

“Then what does the ‘2’ stand for?”

“Including that person, their party has two members, maybe?”

“In that case... Does ‘R1’ stand for ‘Relationship 1’?”

“Probably. If I had to guess, it represents the hierarchical position of the other party you’re affiliated with.”

With one more person, we could run a more thorough verification. But in any case, you *could* create a “child” party. I wanted to know what would happen to XP distribution in that case, if you could create a “grandchild” party, and a whole host of other things. Unfortunately, we couldn’t answer any of those questions now.

Of course, if this number indicated a hierarchy, the possibility of creating a grandchild party was very likely.

“If you lined up all these parent-child relationships, could you create a clan?”

Miyoshi wondered aloud.

“Clan” was originally a Scottish word meaning “a group of close-knit and interrelated families,” but in games, it referred to a community of users. Put simply, it was a large group of friends or comrades.

Indeed, creating such a group seemed possible. If parties had parent-child relationships, you could create an infinitely large clan connected by telepathy and XP distribution. Somewhere in the dungeons, we could end up finding another fragment or inscription about clans.

“This is a huge discovery!” Naruse shouted. “We need to organize this information and announce it as soon as—”

“Naruse,” I said, interrupting her excitement. “Hold on for a moment.”

“Huh?”

If we reported this information at once, everyone would wonder where we’d gotten it from. And of course, we couldn’t just say, “Oh, we read about it in the grimoire!” Plus...

“I want to use this to prove the legitimacy of the info on Heaven’s Leaks.”

I’d wanted information that no one knew but anyone could verify almost immediately. And the contents of this fragment seemed like they had been written for the very purpose of lending credence to our website.

A Certain Hotel Room, Shinjuku

Inside a Shinjuku hotel room, a man received a coded message and passed it to his leader. After looking over the communication, the leader addressed the group of men.

“Apparently, the squadron attempting to take care of D-Powers within the dungeon was wiped out.”

“The V Directorate?” a subordinate replied. “I don’t believe it.”

“I agree with you, but dungeons are the home field for explorers. They must have had the advantage there.” The leader lightly tapped his desk once, and in a

single moment, the stir vanished from the room. “So now, it’s our turn.”

Their extralegal squadron—simply called “The Barrier”—had been sent from Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service in secret.

The leader spread out a map of Tokyo on his desk. “Our targets could travel to Ichigaya by any number of routes. If they travel by car, we won’t have any problems.” At this, he pointed towards the two roads flanking the JDA. “In the end, they’ll pass through Metropolitan Roads 302 or 405. Those are also called Yasukuni Street and Sotobori Street.”

“But isn’t that right in front of the Ministry of Defense?” a subordinate asked.

“Even if a large-scale traffic accident occurs, the police will be the ones to respond. We don’t need to worry about the military.”

“Understood.”

“The real problem is if they take the train,” the leader continued, pointing to Shinjuku Station on the map. “From Shinjuku, you can travel by the Chuo Line, which runs aboveground, or the Toei Shinjuku Line, which runs belowground. You could also take the Marunouchi Line to Yotsuya, riding the Chuo or Nanboku Lines after that.”

“Tokyo’s route map is insane,” another subordinate commented, looking at the many lines on the paper. “Why are there so many lines running parallel to each other? Blowing up the subway would probably be faster.”

Indeed, collapsing the subway would be a surefire way of stalling D-Powers.

“I can’t authorize a direct assault on mass transit,” the leader replied.

“Carrying out such an attack would mean something entirely different from a mere accident. And it would probably make Japan view us as a serious threat.”

Afterwards, the leader explained the details of the operation and assigned positions to each team.

“Team One, follow D-Powers from their office and report back on their status. Team Two, you’ll stage the car accident. Team Three, you’ll act as my backup.”

Each team leader nodded in response to these assignments.

“If D-Powers takes the subway, take care of them wherever possible,” the

leader instructed. “Since the distance between stations isn’t too far, you should also be able to make a getaway from wherever possible. But if they travel aboveground, this will be the execution point.”

The leader pointed to a place between Ichigaya and Yotsuya. More specifically, it was located next to the Sotobori Park General Ground Tennis Courts where the Sobu and Chuo lines crossed.

“This is a blind spot on both sides of the tracks,” the leader said. “You can take care of them here. And this will be your equipment.”

He then placed handguns and bullet cases on top of the table. After all, walking around Tokyo with assault rifles would be impossible.

“Are these P320s?” a subordinate asked.

In the US Army, SIG P320s had become the successors to Beretta M9s. These handguns also came with a wide range of accessories. Though some Russian squadrons did use SIGs, the P320s hadn’t been adopted yet.

“Even so, using American equipment won’t do much to disguise our actual origins,” the leader said. “I’ve also brought silencers and subsonic rounds.”

The silencers were just insurance since using one would make the gun too big to hide. Likewise, their muffling effect wasn’t that different from being in a large crowd.

“In other words, you don’t mind if we eliminate the target?” a subordinate asked.

Yes, explorers had the advantage inside dungeons, but with only two members, D-Powers had faced down the V Directorate and come out on top. The Barrier might have been an elite unit, but half measures wouldn’t suffice against D-Powers.

“If possible, your mission is simply to steal the orb from them, but...” Here, the leader paused, donning a cruel smile. “Out in the field, anything can happen.”

December 2, 2018 (Sunday)

Shinjuku

On the day of the orb handoff, Miyoshi and I headed to Yoyogi-Hachiman station.

“Kei, wouldn’t it be better to take a car?” Miyoshi asked.

“I’m not so sure about that. Unless someone is planning a large-scale terrorist attack, taking the crowded mass transit seems safer, don’t you think?”

While speaking, I opened up a coin-operated locker, which I’d prepared as a dummy beforehand. I then withdrew a suggestive-looking box from the locker and placed it in my bag. To anyone watching, it would seem as though I’d picked up the orb here. Afterwards, we boarded the next train.

The Odakyu ran through residential areas all the way until Shinjuku. As such, we would immediately know of any disturbances. Plus, we’d only announced the auction a week ago. No one would have been able to place any large-scale traps on the train in that amount of time. Doubly so since no one knew which one we’d be riding.

“By the way, Naruse already published the info on the mansion,” Miyoshi said.

“I heard. She even cut out any shots that we appeared in, right?”

“That was actually my editing.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

No wonder any shots with us had been cut out so cleanly. If we’d hired someone else to do the editing, our identities would have been exposed right then and there.

Miyoshi chuckled proudly. “Call it volunteer work.”

“I owe you one.”

I’d turned down the JDA’s offer to have someone come meet us, considering that an enemy agent switching with that person would be the biggest cliché in the world. Also, if we made our escape while relying on the Arthurs and my stats, any guard would just get in the way. Still, the DSF and Secret Agent

Tanaka's faction were probably watching us from somewhere.

"How are we gonna get to the JDA from Shinjuku?" Miyoshi asked. "Normally, we'd just take the Sobu or Shinjuku Lines, right?"

"Since the Sobu Line is convenient for making transfers, we'll take that one. Once you cross the ticket gate, the next platform is right there."

"Huh? That's your reason?"

"Shinjuku Station has a lot of foreigners," I said. "You don't want to walk a long distance in the middle of that, right? Plus, there isn't anywhere to flee on the subway."

The underground would be dangerous. If any random explosion occurred, we would be buried alive. Likewise, if our pursuers blocked us frontwards and rearwards, we would have no place to escape unless there was a side road. And compared to the surface, setting up a trap underground would be easier, as you would draw far less attention.

Of course, I didn't expect any explosions, but somehow, the surface seemed safer to me.

A man in a business suit and a woman in casual attire sat in the train car behind Yoshimura and Miyoshi.

"They've practically tied a rope around themselves for everyone to follow," the man said.

"Yes, but I doubt anyone will try to kill them here," the woman replied. "More importantly, what the hell are you wearing?"

Normally, Joshua wore simple, fashionable clothes. In such outfits, he radiated the mysterious ease unique to those with self-assurance. As a result, Natalie found his stiff business suit somewhat amusing.

"I've heard that in Shinjuku, foreigners in business suits stand out less," Joshua explained.

"And who did you hear that from? That only applies to the west side."

Natalie's teammates already stood out due to their height, and none of them had been trained in the art of pursuit. To make matters worse, Joshua was holding a paperback copy of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, perhaps thinking of it as a prop. (16) That alone was enough to make a man in a business suit stick out like a sore thumb. And anyway, he'd probably never read on the train in his entire life.

"It's the story of a man who knows his mission is meaningless," Joshua said pompously. "But since no one puts a stop to the operation, he fulfills his duty and dies in the process. Feels like it was written just for us."

"You've probably let your fair share of women get away too," Natalie teased him while casually observing her surroundings.

"Do you see any Asian people who might be following D-Powers?" Joshua asked. "That man named Tanaka is keeping an eye on them. Any lookouts might be with his faction."

"Or they could be from China."

"Yeah, we Americans can't tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese people based on appearance. But wait, didn't you grow up in Japan?"

Natalie sighed. "If that gave me the ability to distinguish between nationalities, this would be a breeze."

"So, you can't tell the difference?"

"Joshua, can *you* tell the difference between American and British people?"

"Of course."

"Really?"

"If I hear their accent, sure."

Yes, even I can do that, Natalie thought indignantly.

A few minutes later, the train rolled into Shinjuku station.

After passing through the Odakyu transfer gate, we went up the stairs to the Sobu Line platform. From there, we slowly headed towards the fourth train car

from the back.

“There’s a group of four foreigners about two cars behind us,” I said.

“This is Shinjuku,” Miyoshi replied. “There are plenty of foreigners here.”

“Yeah, but they don’t have that ‘out of place’ vibe unique to tourists. Plus, they’re walking at the same speed as us without checking for empty seats. Take a look.”

Miyoshi and I were walking very slowly, but right before the train departed, we darted into the fourth car from the back. Of course, the doors didn’t just close, allowing the train to take off. That only happened in movies. Rather, Shinjuku Station had staff members watching the platform, and they wouldn’t allow someone to miss their train. The half-closed doors opened once more, shutting again after a short pause.

“Are the people behind us moving?” Miyoshi asked.

“Don’t underestimate the number of passengers in Shinjuku,” I replied. “It might be Sunday, but at this hour, moving inside the car would be next to impossible.”

Though not packed to the gills, the interior was relatively crowded. There wasn’t enough space to walk around.

“Also,” I added. “This train will probably have an accident right before Yotsuya.”

“How do you know that?”

“The people behind us were using cell phones. Not to mention...”

Yesterday, I’d looked up today’s route on Street View to investigate where an attacker might try to rob someone inside the train. At that time, I’d realized something. Between Shinjuku and Ichigaya on the Sobu Line, there was a single place where trees covered the tracks on either side, making it difficult to see the train from outside.

“If someone attacks us, it’ll be at Sotobori Park,” I concluded.

The Sobu and Chuo Lines formed a flying junction at that location.

At last, the train began moving slowly.

“Do you think Simon and his team are tagging along today?” Miyoshi asked.

“From the looks of things, I wouldn’t be surprised if people connected to DSF were somewhere nearby. But won’t Simon and his teammates be guarding the people receiving the orb?”

But at a time like this, I couldn’t be certain of anything.

“It looks like D-Powers has noticed us,” one of the Russian soldiers said.

“In that case, let’s keep moving through the car and—”

Before the other soldier could finish speaking, the train rattled, and the man holding the strap next to the soldier leaned into him.

“Ah, sumimasen,” the man apologized in Japanese.

The soldier shot the man a glance that said, “It’s no problem.”

He then spoke to his comrade in Russian. “Getting any closer to them right now doesn’t seem possible.”

“At the next station, we’ll close the distance by a single car and make preparations at the designated location.”

“Roger that.”

When the train began running parallel with the Metropolitan Expressway Route No. 4 Shinjuku Line, the overhead announcer began indicating the next stop.

“The next stop will be Sendagaya. Sendagaya.”

“Miyoshi, get ready to leave,” I said.

“Huh?”

“At Yoyogi, our pursuers closed the distance by one car. Looks like they’re planning to sandwich us in this car before we reach that location with poor visibility.”

Once the announcer had finished speaking, the train began to slow down gradually.

“Listen,” I continued. “We’ll head down the stairs, dash through the ticket gate, and turn right. Then we’ll take another right just past the Excelsior Caffé and burst out through the railroad underpass.”

“Y-You want me to sprint all that way? It’s embarrassing to admit this, but I don’t have that much confidence in my stamina...”

Oh right. She only has a VIT of nine.

“Don’t tell me you’re planning to ride a hellhound,” I said.

“Obviously not.”

As soon as the train stopped and the doors opened, we leapt out, racing down the stairs right in front of us. I held up my PASMO over the ticket gate, but once we’d crossed to the other side, Miyoshi started complaining.

“K-Kei, I can’t keep this up!”

Relying on my stats, I scooped Miyoshi underneath my arm like luggage, dashing past the Excelsior Caffé. Hopefully, the sort of people who photographed everything weren’t filming us from behind the glass. In the worst-case scenario, someone might have mistaken me for an active kidnapper.

“You jerk!” Miyoshi shouted. “This is nothing like a bridal carry!”

“Pipe down or you’ll bite your tongue!”

In response, she merely growled at me.

After turning right, I arrived at the Hachiman underpass of the Chuo-Sobu Line. Fortunately, I didn’t need to worry about anyone filming me since there was no one there.

Unless you marked the target, Life Detection was meaningless in a crowd. Yes, this skill could distinguish between species, but it couldn’t tell the difference between friend and foe. And so from the very beginning, I’d planned on going to a place where Life Detection could do its job.

To the right of the underpass exit was the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden.

However, a rock wall of around three to four meters surrounded the garden. In addition to that, there was a two-meter steel fence sitting on top of that rock wall.

Still holding Miyoshi, I started running up the wall. A little farther from here, it had been laid out in a more orderly fashion. Yet just outside the underpass, the natural-looking stones were noticeably uneven. With my current stats, I could probably run up the wall while carrying Miyoshi, so long as I didn't slip on any moss... Or maybe I couldn't.

Thus, I hopped onto a steel beam hanging from the underpass exit. The beam was called a "height limit bar," and it had been painted yellow with black stripes. In a single go, I leapt over the two-meter steel fence, and landed in the garden's forest.

"K-Kei, when did you become an action movie star?!" Miyoshi cried out.

"You can thank my stats. No matter how well-trained those soldiers are, they won't be able to follow us so easily."

Sendagaya Station was adjacent to Shinjuku Gyoen, but currently, you couldn't exit on the side with the park's entrance. If someone wanted to pursue us, they would have three options. First, they could run in the opposite direction from us after crossing the ticket gate. Second, they could race up the hill a long distance from here, leaping over the fence from there. Finally, they could enter properly from Sendagaya Gate, which was even farther ahead.

I could rule out option three due to the distance. Normally, our pursuers would have to take the second option. If they crested the gate from the hill, they would wind up on the edge of the cherry blossom forest. Since sightseers weren't allowed there, we would need to be wary of anyone who entered the park from that location.

"Okay, while this is really amazing and everything," Miyoshi said, "I think the park has an admission fee."

"Ugh," I groaned.

Apparently, she had calmed down enough to start quipping. But yes, there was an admission fee of two hundred yen.⁽¹⁷⁾ Hopefully, the Japanese

government would forgive us given that this was an emergency escape and all.

“Also, you need your ticket when exiting the park,” Miyoshi added.

“Seriously?!”

While still under my arm, Miyoshi folded her own arms. “Hmm,” she hummed. “Becoming an action star might be a little too much for you. But if you’re still going to be some kind of star...”

“Yes?”

“Considering all these twists and turns, maybe you’re a roller coaster.”

Wait, does that make you a passenger?!

“Oh c’mon, at least call me a *meistar!*” I cried.

“If you keep complaining, *disastar* might catch up to you.”

That sounds pretty unlucky. But all these puns are putting me in the mood for some oystars.

“Oh, screw it,” Miyoshi said. “I’ll give you a pass as an action star. But only barely.”

Her arms still folded, Miyoshi nodded to herself smugly. She didn’t seem the least bit tense.

“What’s up with the self-important attitude?” I asked.

Smiling wryly, I headed north. In any case, I would have to jump over the fence on the left side of the Okido Gate. There were quite a few security guards on the parking lot side, but if I quickly crested the left side, perhaps I could escape their notice.

While considering this, I reached a pond with a group of people holding cameras. What was going on here? Panicked, I set Miyoshi down.

“That pond below us is a famous spot for maple trees,” she explained. “And this is the height of their season.”

Damn it. What an inconvenience.

Large, beautifully colored maple trees were reflected on the water’s surface.

Hoping to capture this picturesque scene, rows of tripods lined the road. Under these circumstances, it would be harder to find someone *without* a camera.

At that moment, Life Detection picked up a reaction from the other side of the cherry blossom orchard, where people weren't allowed to enter.

"Just like I thought, someone's following us," I said.

"Oh my," Miyoshi said, unconcerned. "This certainly is thrilling."

"You don't have a care in the world, do you? Your guard dogs are on duty, right?"

"Drudwyn is hiding in your shadow. Cavall and Aethlem are in mine. And Glessic is guarding the office."

There's one in my shadow too? Either way, I'm counting on you mutts. You've been boasting about being able to defend against snipers, after all. If someone attacks us with that sort of firepower, you guys are our only hope. You better work for your gourmet food.

At that moment, I heard the distant sound of gunfire from the direction of our pursuers.

"Kei, was that...?" Miyoshi trailed off.

The two of us looked at each other.

"Yeah, it sounded like gunfire," I confirmed.

Seriously, they're firing off rounds in a crowded place like this? If these guys aren't aware of proper etiquette, this could turn into a lot more than fun and games. But what are they shooting at?

Miyoshi and I began quietly moving. After passing the rose beds, we headed towards Okido Gate, where a large greenhouse was visible to our left.

"Looks like there's a western orchid exhibition," Miyoshi said.

She pointed at the greenhouse, which had a display that read, "Shinjuku Gyoen's 30th Western Orchid Exhibition." Apparently, this was the last day of the exhibition.

So that's why there's a crowd around the greenhouse! What horrible timing!

Well, I doubt that anyone will be looking at the back. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking? Yeah, we'll probably be spotted through the glass. And these days, everyone's walking around with something that can record video. The modern era can be a real pain in the ass.

I checked Life Detection, and found our pursuers still in the shrubbery outside the cherry blossom orchard. Were they not moving?

"Guess we have no other choice," I said.

"Hold on!"

Just as I decided to force my way through, Miyoshi stopped me, trotting towards Okido Gate.

"Excuse me!" she called out with a smile. "We accidentally threw our tickets away. May we still leave through here?"

"Huh?" the old receptionist replied. "No, that won't be a problem. Just be more careful next time."

"Of course. Thank you very much. The maple trees were so beautiful. We'll come back another time."

"Thank you, Miss."

Wearing a good-natured smile befitting an old man, the receptionist watched us go.

Her communication skills really are something else.

"You're pretty amazing," I said.

"That wouldn't have worked coming in, but it's no problem when leaving. What were you thinking, trying to force your way through a place swarming with security? Are you an idiot?"

In response to that, I could only grit my teeth and clench my fist.

A worried smile crossed Miyoshi's face. "What do you think our pursuers are doing?"

From what I could tell, they were still in the same place.

“Whoops!”

Joshua stuck his foot in the closing train door, making it open once again. Alongside Natalie, he began chasing after the group of men who had just leapt onto the platform.

“Where are we?!” Joshua cried.

“Sendagaya!” Natalie yelled in response.

“And where the hell is that?”

“You saw the map during the briefing, didn’t you? It’s on the southern end of the national park!”

Joshua and Natalie turned right into the underpass tunnel, finding the group of men running about ten meters ahead of them. At the exit, someone else—presumably Yoshimura—ran even farther ahead of this group. However, while holding something under his right arm, his feet suddenly...

“Disappeared?!” Joshua shouted.

From here, the exit looked like nothing more than a small cutout of space. Though Joshua hadn’t been able to see well due to the distance, Yoshimura had certainly been there. Then he’d disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“Look at the guys in front of us,” Natalie said. Currently, they stood below a black and yellow striped bar. “Yoshimura must have gone up from there.”

“In a single instant?” Joshua asked.

“You could do the same thing, right?”

“Well, now that you mention it, yeah.”

Joshua looked up at the bar. The only characters he could decipher were “3.3 M.” In all likelihood, the bar hung 3.3 meters from the ground.

Slowing down, Joshua and Natalie hid behind a curve in the road, watching the men begin to climb up the cliff-like wall.

“Their training doesn’t look too shabby,” Joshua noted.

Apparently, they couldn’t leap over the fence in one go like Yoshimura, but they still climbed the wall smoothly.

“And since they’re chasing after D-Powers so blatantly, they must be those bears of the north, eh?” Joshua continued.

Once the Russians had finished climbing the wall, Joshua and Natalie chased after them with incredible speed, jumping on top of the height limit bar. And in the next moment, they’d crested the fence into the national park.

In response to two people suddenly appearing behind them, the four men chasing after D-Powers spun around. At that moment, they began moving to eliminate the threat. The two men in front drew their guns and fired in a single motion. As soon as Joshua and Natalie saw their line of fire, both of them dodged, hiding behind a tree.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Joshua said. “Did they really just open fire on us?”

“They’ve got guts, doing that in Japan,” Natalie replied.

In this country, a single gunshot could mobilize several hundred police officers, and these men had opened fire without a care in the world. Either they were accustomed to battle, or they were unaccustomed to Japan.

While the two men in the rear leveled their guns as backup, the others moved to circle around the tree. Since Joshua and Natalie hadn’t returned fire, the Russians must have assumed they were unarmed.

“Don’t kill them,” Natalie said. “It’ll cause us way too much grief.”

If a DEA agent is telling me this, she must be serious, Joshua thought.

During a narcotics trial, the testimony of someone wearing a mask wouldn’t have any effect. However, if someone testified with their identity exposed, they ran the risk of retribution from drug cartels. As a result, shooting criminals rather than arresting them had become the norm for the DEA.

When Natalie saw the two men in the front circling around, she acted quickly. As a former member of FAST—the DEA’s special forces—she was skilled in hand-to-hand combat. While avoiding her opponent’s line of fire, she dove forward at an unbelievable speed, knocking the man’s gun from his hand. She then drove her palm into his jaw, simultaneously using him to block the rear soldiers’ line of fire.

Thanks to his stats, Joshua was even quicker. As Natalie knocked the gun from the first man's hand, Joshua rapidly thrust a small knife into the wrists of the rear guardsmen. At the exact same time, he swept the legs of the man circling around, slamming the back of his head into the ground.

Without pausing, Joshua and Natalie knocked all the men unconscious. Afterwards, they dragged the Russian soldiers' bodies along the ground, laying them in the shadow of a tree. Silently, Natalie began rummaging through their equipment and belongings.

"Waste of time," Joshua said. "You're not going to find anything. If something pops up that *does* seem to reveal their identities, it's definitely a fake."

"You're probably right. Their guns are SIG P320s. They're trying to act like US deployments."

Regardless, Natalie quickly disarmed the soldiers and restrained them. She then walked over to a man sitting on a bench, which had been set up on the promenade running along the cherry blossom orchard.

"I leave the rest to you," she spoke in Japanese, leaving the unconscious soldiers beside the bench.

Without waiting for a response, she began chasing after Yoshimura.

"You sure that's okay?" Joshua asked.

"Of course I am. He's obviously one of Tanaka's men."

Though Tanaka's personnel had clearly gotten off at Sendagaya, Natalie hadn't noticed them following from behind. In that case, they had either entered the park through a different route, or a different squadron had been sent here.

And no matter how quiet the battle might have been, it had taken place right next to the promenade. Furthermore, since two bullets had been fired, the man on the bench definitely would have noticed something odd happening. Anyone who could sit there in such a laid-back manner wasn't your average joe.

"And what will you do if he's not connected to this at all?" Joshua asked.

"In that case, he'll probably call the police. But then that part's none of our

business.”

Natalie’s actions surprised Joshua; she was normally the most sensible member of their team. Nevertheless, he followed after her, deciding that any further argument would be pointless.

“Kei, what should we do now?” Miyoshi asked. “Take the Marunouchi Line to Yotsuya or keep going north to the Shinjuku Line?”

“We’ll cross the intersection of Shinjuku’s first district,” I replied. “Then we’ll hail a taxi on Shinjuku Street or Gaien-Nishi Street.”

A fair number of taxis were parked around the Okido Gate exit, but any cars waiting for passengers could have been traps. Given that, I was going to hail one of the taxis driving down the intersection of Shinjuku’s first district. Since we’d taken our enemies by such surprise, they wouldn’t have been able to set up a trap taxi in the flow of traffic.

“Got it,” Miyoshi said.

Dashing over to the intersection, she hailed a taxi in no time at all. One of those highly criticized JPN Taxis, at that. Its sliding doors were slow to open and close, which could put a lot of pressure on passengers on a busy street. Furthermore, its windows didn’t even open. But either way, I found its spaciousness rather pleasant.

“Take us through Yasukuni Street to the JDA headquarters in Ichigaya,” I said.

The car began sliding forward, continuing north down Gaien-Nishi Street. After taking a right at West Tomihisacho-Nishi’s intersection, we entered Yasukuni Street.

“Hey, look over there!” a Russian soldier cried.

Two men who had driven a car from Yotsuya spotted D-Powers. At this very moment, their targets were getting into a taxi.

Even so, the pursuit unit’s signal was still being transmitted from within the park. Fortunately, the Russian team’s car was stuck at an intersection traffic

light in Shinjuku's first district. The man in the passenger's seat hopped out of the car and raced to the park to check on the situation.

When the light turned green, the remaining driver pulled a sharp U-turn, earning a chorus of boos from the surrounding cars. Afterwards, he began chasing after D-Powers' taxi in order to verify their route.

"Hey, Natalie," Joshua said. "Did you see that guy who just passed us?"

They had just crossed paths with another suspicious-looking man outside Okido Gate. Wary of this, Joshua had called out to Natalie. Yet at the same time, he spotted a car pulling a dangerous U-turn, and the sound of squealing tires resounded from the intersection.

"Damn it!" Joshua cursed. "They won't give us a break today!"

He and Natalie took off running, jumping into a taxi in front of them.

"What did you say?"

The Russian team leader spoke to his subordinate over a communications device.

"Sir, it seems as though Team 1 has been restrained."

This particular soldier had gone into the back of the park to check on the situation. There, he'd found his four comrades restrained. Likewise, several other men had surrounded them, appearing to be in contact with some organization.

"Restrained?" the leader asked. "They couldn't even commit suicide?"

"All of them seemed to be unconscious."

Seriously? the leader thought. *Someone knocked our whole team unconscious without killing them? Could they have used gas even in the middle of the capital?*

"So, what happened to D-Powers?" the leader asked.

"It seems like they're taking a taxi north on 319."

“Got it. I’ll leave the rest to you, Team 2.”

In a war zone, they wouldn’t have to worry about standing out. But here, there were too many restrictions. Making the attack look like an accident was the most they could do.

“Does it look like they’ll be able to steal the orb from D-Powers?” the leader asked.

“With your permission and the right equipment, they could kill both members of D-Powers,” the subordinate responded. “If not, stealing the orb would be an impossible task for one person.”

“Understood. Keep monitoring them. And if you get the chance...take it.”

“May I handle the timing myself, sir?”

“Yes, if you’re feeling confident.”

“Roger that.”

The leader ended the call, resolving to use the last trump card he’d sent to the area around the JDA. According to his info, D-Powers couldn’t guarantee the orb’s delivery if either of their members were harmed.

Well then, I’m left with no other choice, the leader thought with a shrug of his shoulders.

He then called another subordinate stationed at Hotel Grand Hill Ichigaya.

Miyoshi let out a deep breath, watching the scenery roll by outside the taxi window. “Looks like things have settled down for now.”

“Yeah, seems that way,” I said. “Once we reach Yasukuni Street, it should be difficult for our pursuers to concoct any more grand action sequences.”

Despite my words, I suddenly felt uneasy.

“What’s wrong?” Miyoshi asked.

“In the end, no matter which route we take, our destination is the same, right?”

“That’s true.”

“Then even if we’ve shaken off our tails, they’ll be lying in wait around the JDA, don’t you think?”

“Seriously? The JDA is right in front of the Ministry of Defense.”

Just then, we passed the Ministry of Defense’s front gates and the “300 meters to Sotobori Street” marker. As the road curved gently to the left, a large semitrailer began accelerating towards us from the center lane of oncoming traffic. I had a bad feeling about this, and signaled Miyoshi with my eyes.

Right as Miyoshi got the message, the truck suddenly swerved to the right. Almost as if a tire had been punctured, causing the driver to lose control of the wheel. In the blink of an eye, the vehicle toppled sideways, producing a thunderous boom. Carried by inertia, the trailer began sliding towards us.

After being swung around by centrifugal force, the trailer thrust forwards, completely blocking the three lanes heading east. To our right were the oncoming lanes, and to our left was a concrete curb and fence. We had nowhere left to escape. Panicking, the taxi driver tried to slam on the brakes.

“Don’t stop!” I bellowed. “Keep going straight!”

As I shouted, Drudwyn slammed on the accelerator from the shadows, causing the taxi to suddenly pick up speed. Before the driver could even pull on the wheel, the vehicle plunged towards the trailer.

In response, the driver screamed, shutting his eyes.

Meanwhile, Miyoshi let forth a short cry of, “Cavall!”

The trailer was still sliding towards us on its side. Nevertheless, Cavall leapt out from the trailer’s shadow, lifting it up on his shoulders. The hellhound then flung the trailer upwards, where it spun in the air just long enough for a taxi to pass under. If this had been a movie, this scene definitely would have been a triple-take action sequence in slow motion.



With a deafening crash, the trailer rolled towards the bus stop in front of the Ministry of Defense, mowing it down. Afterwards, it continued sliding along the road, coming to a stop around the ministry's front gates.

"A-Are we alive?" the driver asked with a dumbfounded expression.

Miyoshi and I whispered to each other quietly enough so that no one could overhear us.

"Nice going," I said.

"We'll have to give them some magic crystals later."

"Ugh. Guess there's no avoiding it."

While I watched the stunned driver from the corner of my eye, the car continued forward due to inertia and idle creep. Finally, it stopped before Hotel Grand Hill Ichigaya. Normally, you couldn't cross the street here, but due to the large accident behind us, no cars were following us.

"We'll get off here," I said. "And keep the change."

After paying the driver with a ten-thousand-yen bill, we jumped out of the car and crossed the road. The JDA headquarters was right in front of us.

Hotel Grand Hill Ichigaya stood across the street from the JDA. A man wearing inconspicuous clothes stood on the roof of the building next to the hotel. While hiding beneath a camouflage covering, he withdrew a gun about 1.2 meters long from his bag.

The SR-25M—a sniper rifle used by the US Marine Corps—had an MOA of 0.75. [\(18\)](#) In other words, from around ninety meters away, the bullets would all strike within a two-centimeter range.

Still, nothing beats a Russian bolt action rifle, the man thought. If I had a T-5000, that would be perfect.

For this operation, he would have to abandon his gun during the escape. Thus, his superiors had prepared something special for him. And when he'd test-fired this rifle yesterday, it hadn't felt too bad.

The JDA entrance had a long overhang, and there were no sniping points from across the river. As such, the first designated point had been the hotel rooftop. However, it had been at too much of an angle, and he would have needed to lean out over the edge. And since the hotel rooftop was lower than the JDA building, he would have been completely visible from the windows.

The SNP Sanaicho Building—located a little farther away—would have been a decent location. Unfortunately, it was around 350 meters away from the JDA, and because the targets' route wove between buildings, this location would have given him only a split-second chance to make the shot.

On a competitive shooting range, he would have been confident in his success. Yet now, he was attempting to snipe two people crossing a road that ran alongside the river. What's more, buildings flanked him on either side. And finally, once you added the targets' movements into the equation, this began to feel like a one-in-a-million shot.

In the end, he'd inspected several buildings next to the hotel, ultimately choosing one that allowed him to access the rooftop. From here, he would be about one hundred meters away from D-Powers.

Normally, I could make this shot with my eyes closed, but...

At that moment, a semitrailer began barreling down the road in front of him.

Apparently, his "guests" had arrived.

Where the road curved gently right, the trailer crashed onto its side. Watching this play out, the man furrowed his brow.

Don't you think that's a bit much, Team 2?

The JDA building was taller than this one, and if a large accident occurred down below, a crowd of people would start looking out the window. No matter how camouflaged the man might have been, the fewer people paying attention to the outside, the better. Fortunately, everyone would be looking at the scene of the accident, which had occurred in the opposite direction from his rooftop.

Maybe I won't have to do anything, the man thought as the trailer slid across the ground, completely blocking off the road.

Then the trailer began floating in the air unnaturally, and the taxi—presumably carrying D-Powers—drove under it unharmed. Upon seeing this, a switch flipped inside the man.

As we jogged towards the entrance, Miyoshi—her face slightly pale—turned around and muttered something to me. “Kei, that accident just now...”

“Remember what we discussed at the JDA the other day?” I asked.

“What was that?”

“If either one of us dies, we won’t be able to guarantee the safety of any orbs in our possession.”

“Oh, right. I do remember you making that bluff. Does that mean...?”

“They were trying to kill us?” I finished. “Maybe.”

If this information had leaked, and our pursuers had failed to steal the orb, they might have decided to kill me or Miyoshi in the hopes of annihilating the item.

“That sort of thing doesn’t happen in Japan,” Miyoshi protested.

“True. The trailer could’ve flipped sideways on accident, and we’re just being delusional about all this.”

Still, someone *had* been following us at the park. And why would a semitrailer be driving down Yasukuni Street with such impeccable timing? Where had it been carrying goods to, exactly? If you continued in that direction, you would reach the center of Shinjuku. Even farther in that direction were Hachioji and Otsuki. A trailer should have been headed to Kawasaki or Yokohama.

At that moment, ambulances and patrol cars sped past us, their sirens growing distant due to the Doppler effect. The initial response time of Japanese emergency vehicles never ceased to amaze me. While thinking this, I turned the corner towards the JDA entrance.

And that’s when it happened.

The sniper had centered the woman's face within the crosshairs of his 4X scope. He could have aimed for the man as well, but he liked to watch a pretty face explode. He would be shooting downwards, he had a tailwind, and the targets were walking forwards. Under these conditions, he couldn't possibly miss. And so, he squeezed the trigger.

A black circle of around five centimeters appeared in front of Miyoshi's head, producing a light *thwip*. Almost immediately afterwards, it disappeared.

Wait, didn't I see that same black hole on the tenth level?

"Was that...?" I trailed off.

Holy crap, did someone just try to snipe us?

Although we should have immediately run for cover, neither of us had received that kind of training. So instead, we looked up at the roof of the neighboring building, where the bullet had seemed to originate.

"Aethlem!"

As soon as Miyoshi shouted his name, I could imagine the hellhound appearing in our attacker's shadow like a black bullet.

Missing that shot should have been impossible. Yet while looking through the scope, the sniper saw no sign of the bullet hitting its mark. The face in his crosshairs merely looked surprised. Not a single scratch marred her features.

Where the hell had the bullet gone? He was only one hundred meters away from the target. Could the scope have been misadjusted? No, it couldn't have been so out of alignment that the bullet struck outside his view.

Despite his confusion, the sniper placed his finger on the trigger. He would complete his mission, even if it meant using all his remaining bullets. However, he never managed to carry through with this intention. Instead, his vision suddenly turned black. At the same time, he fell unconscious.

Rather than fleeing, Miyoshi and I stood stock-still, but a second bullet never struck. Perhaps the sniper had given up after the first shot and ran away. Or perhaps Aethlem had incapacitated him similarly to the men who'd tried breaking into our office.

"Are you all right, Miyoshi?" I asked.

"I can't believe someone actually tried to snipe us," she replied. "What an incredible experience."

In response to her unconcerned tone, I let out an exasperated sigh. "I don't get you sometimes."

"When I told you to trust the Arthurs, I wasn't just showing off. Still, the fact that someone tried to snipe us hasn't sunk in at all." At this, Miyoshi laughed. "I mean, we didn't even see the bullet. We only heard the sound."

When watching videos of overseas mass shootings, people would—more often than not—only start running after someone had collapsed. Regardless, this was still a huge shock.

I gently placed an arm around Miyoshi's shoulders, and the two of us walked into the JDA lobby.

JDA Headquarters, Ichigaya

"Oh, Miyoshi!" Naruse cried.

As we passed through the JDA's automatic doors, warm air from inside blew towards us. After spotting Miyoshi and me, Naruse ran straight for us.

"What's going on?" she asked curiously, noticing my arm around Miyoshi's shoulder. "You two seem oddly close today."

"Oh, well, um..." I hedged. "A lot happened."

As I removed my arm from around Miyoshi's shoulder, she giggled. Yeah, she was probably okay.

"Speaking of which, there was a huge uproar outside," Naruse said. "Are you two all right?"

The “huge uproar” must have been the semitrailer accident. When I’d said “a lot happened,” Naruse must have made the connection.

“Either way, we’re safe now,” I said. “More or less.”

Mentioning the sniping incident here would only result in a greater commotion. Once the orb transaction was done, reporting to Secret Agent Tanaka would be more than enough. I couldn’t imagine our pursuers trying to blow up the JDA building next. That method of killing us would be too unpredictable and over-the-top.

According to a quick confirmation from Aethlem, the sniper was unconscious on the neighboring building’s rooftop, having fallen into the hellhound’s pit. If something couldn’t move of its own will within the pit, the hellhounds had to carry it themselves, much like in any normal space. Since this was relatively draining for the hellhounds, Aethlem had demanded that we do something about the sniper soon. Of course, if we weren’t going to move the man, I didn’t see any problems with just leaving him there. Restraining the sniper ASAP and leaving the rest to Tanaka would be the safest course of action.

Either way, the trade came first. After handing the orb over to the DSF, we would return to our peaceful lives. Or so I wanted to believe.

“Hello,” a voice said in English. *“Are you the people with the orb?”*

A girl who looked to be in middle school called out to us from behind Naruse. Why was she in a place like this? Since she appeared to be American, perhaps she was with Simon.

“That’s right,” I replied. *“I’m Yoshimura. Are you with the DSF?”*

Rather than answer this question, the girl merely smiled, sticking out her hand. *“I’m Monica Clark. It’s nice to meet you.”*

While shaking her hand, I felt something hard to describe.

“Kei, who would you pick to use a four-hundred-billion-yen orb?” Miyoshi asked. “A forty-year-old researcher or a teenage researcher whose family has no history of genetic illnesses?”

Once a skill user died, their abilities vanished, no matter how much time or

effort you spent acquiring the orb. In that case, you would want the skill user to live as long as possible. Sure, I could understand that reasoning. Yet at the same time...

“But look at her,” I said. “She can’t be out of middle school yet.”

“America has its own set of circumstances,” Miyoshi replied. “It’s not our place to say anything.”

Miyoshi was exactly right. However, if Monica were to use this orb secretly—like Naruse—that would be a different matter. On the other hand, using this orb for an organization would mean becoming a caged bird for the rest of her life.

“Hey, Yoshimura.”

As I turned to address Monica, the lobby’s automatic doors opened, and Simon raised his hand in greeting. He had apparently gone outside to check on the situation.

“That was one hell of an action sequence,” he continued. *“You’ll put Hollywood to shame.”*

So he hadn’t missed us driving under the trailer.

“How do you know about that?” I asked.

From behind Simon, an ash-blond man—tall and slender—spoke up. *“We were watching from behind.”*

If I recalled correctly, he was Team Simon’s scout: Joshua Rich.

“Oh, so you guys were also guarding us from the rear?” I asked. *“I should’ve guessed.”*

“Not that we were much help though,” Joshua answered.

“Did other pursuers stop in the park because of you?”

In response to this, Joshua merely winked, giving me a thumbs-up.

Miyoshi—who had been making a call at the edge of the lobby—jogged up to me once more. “I just contacted Tanaka. He’ll be late due to the trouble at the park.”

“Got it,” I answered.

“So anyway, we chased after you in a taxi of our own,” Joshua said. “When that trailer came flying towards you, I nearly shit my pants.” At this, he laughed. “I thought you were dead for sure.”

Letting the people under your protection die before your very eyes would be quite the blunder. Still, Team Simon’s members weren’t professional guards. They merely had incredible stats. To my great surprise, the US might have been lacking in personnel as well.

“But man,” Simon said. “You really stirred the pot the other day, huh?”

He tried to grimace and failed, the corners of his mouth quirking into an amused smile.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“The ninth level, of course. What else?”

He was talking about our final venture into the dungeon’s ninth level. Apparently, the scouting teams from around the world had suffered greatly in the colonial worm section.

“The US had a USDD team chasing after you as well,” Simon revealed. “Those worms might not be very strong, but...there are a whole lot of ’em, and they’re ugly as hell, y’know? Everyone ran out of bullets in the blink of an eye. It was a pretty traumatic battle for everyone.”

While Simon tried to stifle a chuckle, Joshua gave an exaggerated shrug from behind.

“So, did the colonial worms drop any items?” Miyoshi asked.

Simon’s eyes lit up. *“Does that mean they drop something important?”*

“What? I was just curious, but... Why do you ask?”

“Because you of all people showed interest.”

“Come again?”

“Don’t give me that. Who do you think is the second hottest explorer in the world right now?”

According to Simon, Miyoshi had originally drawn attention from the entire

world due to the orb auctions. But after the sale of Otherworldly Language Comprehension, she'd now become the most famous commercial license holder in the world. If there were a ranking of those with WDA commercial licenses, she would have been number one by a wide margin.

"The entire world went into a frenzy looking for that orb, and you found the thing like it was nothing," Simon said. "It's not just other merchants who've noticed your skills. Militaries and politicians are paying attention too."

"It was all one big coincidence though," Miyoshi said.

"No way that's true," Simon replied, rejecting her claim outright.

Since I couldn't let him argue the point too much, I casually changed the conversation.

"If Miyoshi is the second hottest explorer, who's the first?" I asked. "The leader of Team Simon, who captured Evans Dungeon?"

"Unfortunately, my team and I are already third and below," Simon answered. "Even in my wildest dreams, I never would've imagined Evans Dungeon being overshadowed this fast."

"Then who is it?"

"Do you even have to ask? The world's top-ranked explorer, who exploded onto the scene like a comet."

Crap, I thought. Looks like I just poked the hornet's nest.

"Still, I don't know anything about this person," Simon continued. "I asked a lot of questions in Yoyogi, but none of the explorers I spoke to knew anything about our top-ranked peer. They didn't even have any theories."

"In that case, maybe this person isn't in Yoyogi," I suggested.

"You think? Well, it's a possibility. Either way, no one in the JDA or any explorers have any idea who this person might be. They're being called 'The Phantom.' 'Mr. X' is another nickname, but there's no way of knowing if this person is a man."

Well, if you meant phantom as in "something existing in appearance only," perhaps that was on the mark.

“Kei, which name do you think is cooler?” Miyoshi asked while suppressing a laugh. “King Salmon or The Phantom?”

Like I care!

“So anyway, you’re already a legend across the world,” Simon said to Miyoshi. “Everyone thinks you’re the number one orb hunter.” Here, he paused for a laugh. “Of course, the number two orb hunter doesn’t even exist.”

Yep, I was the world’s one and only.

“All that being said, there’s no shortage of hot topics coming out of Area 12 recently,” Simon concluded.

Monica listened to our trivial conversation in silence, her expression one of deep interest.

“Speaking of which,” I said. “Simon, who’s this girl?”

“Well...” Simon began hesitantly. “Trying to hide it here would be meaningless, I suppose. She’s going to be the orb user. Or so I’ve heard.”

Even though I’d already guessed as much, I still felt somewhat indignant. “What of social justice?” I might have asked. But right now, I wouldn’t argue from a commoner’s narrow-minded perspective born of misunderstanding. However, if this girl was being deceived, I would have a thing or two to say about that.

“Do you understand what that means?” I asked.

“I do understand what you want to say,” Simon replied. “But this matter isn’t my concern.”

Apparently, he was a soldier to his core.

“Monica,” I said, stooping down to eye level with the girl.

“Yes?” she asked.

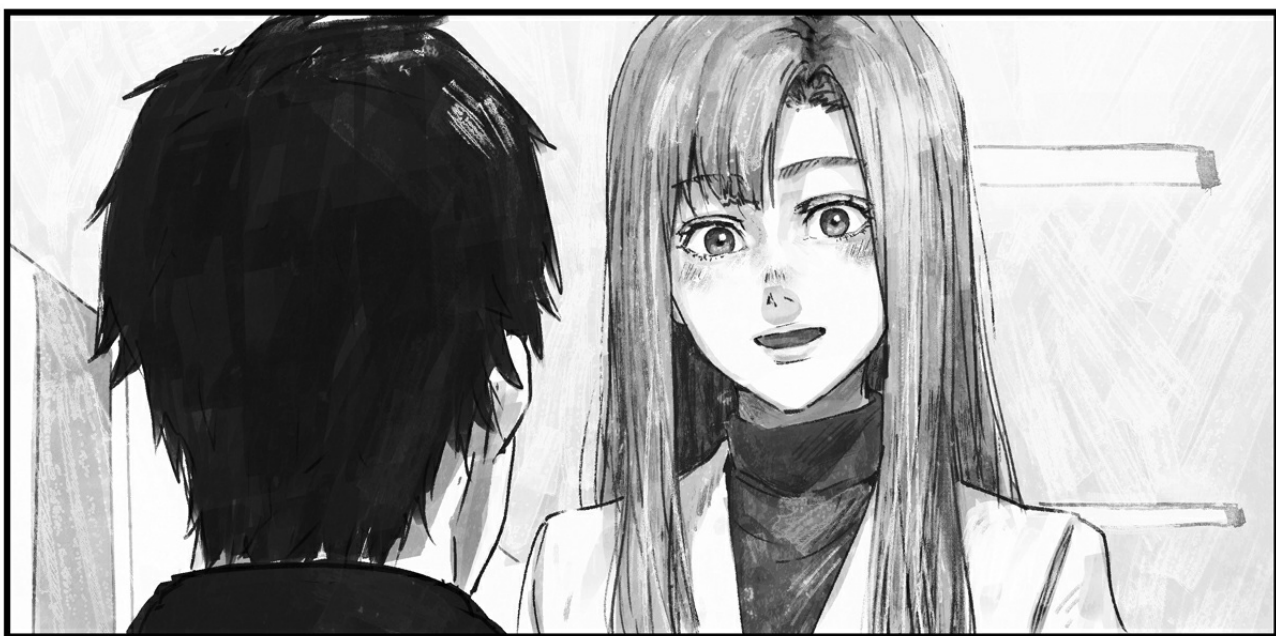
“Do you know about the orb you’re about to use?”

“Of course.”

“Did you agree to use the orb of your own volition without any kind of pressure?”

“So long as we live in a society, we can’t completely escape that sort of pressure. Without rules of some kind, freedom is nothing more than chaos.”

Having said this, Monica donned a somewhat mature smile.



“Hey, Simon,” I said. “The punch line isn’t going to be ‘Oh, this girl is actually thirty,’ right?”

“No idea,” he replied. “But she started attending MIT at nine years old, and just before turning fourteen, she obtained her PhD in the shortest amount of time possible.”

While that was truly incredible, intellectual and mental growth were two different matters.

“Listen to me,” I said to Monica. “There are quite a few things about the human spirit that can’t be explained through logic.”

“That’s true,” she replied.

“Even if you’re satisfied with this situation right now, there may come a time when you can no longer bear it.”

“I understand.”

I looked Monica in the eye, unsure of what to say. And so, I merely smiled, voicing the first thought that came to my mind. *“But don’t worry. By the time you reach adulthood, you’ll be much freer than you are now.”*

After all, the dungeons were attempting to propagate Otherworldly Language Comprehension.

Monica listened to my seemingly baseless words with a serious expression. Bringing my face close to hers, I whispered the URL for Heaven’s Leaks softly enough that no one else could hear me.

“Look up this website on Christmas night of this year,” I said. “But keep it a secret until then.”

“Got it!” Monica cried. “This is a secret spell, isn’t it?”

This time, she spoke gleefully, wearing a childish smile.

“A secret spell?” I repeated

“Simon called you a sorcerer.”

Currently, Indo-European high societies were abuzz with conversations about a Japanese sorcerer. Yet at that time, I hadn’t known anything about the

rumors.

“Kei,” Miyoshi said. “Don’t you dare lay a finger on that young girl.”

“Listen here,” I replied. “Just who do you think I am?”

After receiving a call from one of their members, Tanaka’s team arrived in the park to clean up after Natalie and Joshua’s mess.

One of Tanaka’s subordinates examined the four unconscious men, all of whom had been restrained. “Their equipment is American,” he said. “But they appear to be of East Slavic descent.”

Tanaka looked around the area in admiration. “I must say, this took incredible skill.”

A thicket of trees blocked the line of sight from the promenade. That being said, the victors had still eliminated a special forces unit beside that promenade without drawing anyone’s attention. And on a Sunday, no less. They probably hadn’t been carrying weapons either.

“Two bullets were fired,” the subordinate noted.

“Whoever did this easily dodged fire from a trained gunman at close range,” Tanaka said. “And before the other three soldiers could shoot, the victors knocked their attackers unconscious. Much easier said than done. Could any of our personnel have accomplished such a feat?”

“I don’t know. But according to a team member who removed the equipment from these soldiers, it was a man and woman who knocked them unconscious.”

“This is sounding more and more impossible.” Just then, Tanaka’s phone vibrated. “Excuse me for a moment.” Walking a short distance from the scene, he picked up his phone and offered a greeting of, “Hello.”

“Oh, hello,” a carefree voice responded from the opposite end of the line. “This is Miyoshi.”

She then proceeded to tell him something unbelievable.

“You’ve apprehended a sniper?” Tanaka repeated.

“Well, yes. We’ve restrained the man and set his rifle aside, so if you don’t mind, please come pick him up.”

“H-Hold on, Miyoshi!”

After Miyoshi ended the call, Tanaka stared at his phone dumbfoundedly. Snipers performed their work from afar, escaping immediately afterwards. Apprehending one would be completely different from capturing a spy, who might approach their target. Tanaka couldn’t fathom how D-Powers had accomplished this. Seeing weapons brandished in Japan without restraint made Tanaka feel ashamed. And on the twenty-ninth, foreign visitors had arrived from Domodedovo Airport. His team’s inability to contend with these threats only emphasized the problems in their own organization.

“We’re definitely lacking in personnel,” Tanaka muttered to himself.

If a large-scale terrorist attack occurred during the upcoming Olympics, would mobilizing the police be enough to prevent it beforehand?

Perhaps we should ask D-Powers to protect the VIPs, Tanaka considered with a humorless smile.

Once the actual transaction had ended without incident, Monica immediately used the orb. Afterwards, the adults accompanying her brought over files, which she looked over and discussed with them. In all likelihood, they wanted to know if she had truly become capable of understanding their contents.

“Kei,” Miyoshi said.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“According to Naruse, my commercial license went up in rank, so she gave me a new card.”

“Well, you are a legend, after all.”

“Please don’t start with that.”

“So, did you suddenly go up two ranks?”

“About that...”

Miyoshi handed me her new license card, which seemed slightly different from my own plastic one. Hers was completely black, and even at a glance, it gave off a stately air. Likewise, that brilliantly shining, pearly letter ‘S’ could only mean...

“A seven-rank promotion?!” I cried out.

“Wait, don’t soldiers who’ve died in the line of duty receive a two-rank promotion?” Miyoshi asked. “Don’t jinx me like that! Saying that I ‘skipped’ seven ranks sounds much less ominous.”

WDA ranks weren’t based on actual ability. Instead, a person’s level of contribution to Dungeon Associations across the world determined their rank. The kind of products you sold and how much commission the JDA earned had a large impact on commercial license rankings. And come to think of it, the JDA had just earned forty billion yen from one transaction. No wonder Miyoshi had jumped up to “S” rank.

“Can you guess what this means?” Miyoshi asked.

“No, tell me.”

“We’ll now have a free pass to restricted dungeons across the world.”

WDA rankings had a variety of uses. Companies hiring explorers used them as a standard for determining payment, and a low rank could limit the purchase of weapons and armor. Similarly, a high rank could provide access into restricted dungeons.

I nodded. “In that case, we could become worldwide orb hunters.”

“Exactly.”

For the most part, Miyoshi and I wanted to live carefree lives and do whatever research caught our fancy. The idea of important people hounding us to collect different orbs sounded terrible.

“As a general rule, let’s turn down those kinds of offers,” I said.

“You got it.”

On the other side of the room, Monica was still speaking to the people around her. Perhaps feeling bored, Simon called out to us.

"Hey there, you two," he said. "That group will be heading back to America soon, but my team is going to start raiding Yoyogi in full force. Hope to see you down there."

What? Go back to America and take your job seriously! Speaking of which...

"Are you guarding Monica on the way back to Yokota?" I asked.

"Huh?" Simon responded. "Oh, yeah."

"Then I should let you know..."

I took Simon to a corner of the room, and in a whisper, I told him about the sniper attempting to kill Miyoshi.

"Are you serious?!" Simon cried. "Was the semitrailer another assassination attempt?"

"I can't say for certain, but I do have my suspicions," I admitted.

"And what happened to the perps?"

"We managed to restrain the sniper, but I would advise a little caution until you reach Yokota."

"Got it. Thanks for the tip."

Afterwards, Simon went out into the hallway to make a call on his cell since this room didn't have reception.

Upon leaving the conference room, Monica stuck out a hand towards me.
"Thanks for everything, Mr. Yoshimura."

During the return trip, she would apparently take a helicopter from the Ministry of Defense to Yokota. Come to think of it, Japan *had* helped America acquire this orb.

"If the space between research and politics grows stifling, you don't have to do what you're told," I said while shaking Monica's hand. "And if you're not explicitly forbidden from doing something, feel free to do it. Don't worry. So long as you're not directly disobeying orders, your superiors will overlook it at least once, no matter what the circumstances may be." At this, I winked at her. "And if anything happens, you can always give me a call."

Monica gave me a small nod, smiled, and began walking down the corridor in a stately manner.

If at all possible, I wanted her to be happy. There was no reason for her to live as a martyr for something, as her last name implied. [\(19\)](#)

“You’re a good guy,” Simon said, popping up next to me all of a sudden. *“A little meddlesome though.”*

“You’re wrong about that,” I answered shortly, glancing in his direction.

I simply wanted to live in the manner of my choosing to the best of my abilities. Consequently, some of my actions being contradictory or a waste of effort was inevitable. The trauma I’d suffered at an exploitative workplace had played a large role in shaping me.

Simon wrapped an arm around my shoulder in an overly familiar manner. *“At the very least, you should be careful. Down in the dungeons, the good ones die first.”*

Glancing at Simon from the side, I rapped my knuckles against his chest. *“In other words, I’ll be okay as long as you’re alive.”*

Grinning, Simon removed his arm from my shoulder, raising his hand in farewell. He then ran over to Monica’s side. Miyoshi and I watched their group leave the lobby, feeling as though all the strength had left our bodies.

“I guess it’s over,” Miyoshi said.

“Yep.”

The street-side trees had begun taking on vibrant colors, signaling the beginning of winter. Surrounded by Team Simon and secret police, Monica entered the limousine parked out front. The Ministry of Defense was only a minute’s drive away. So long as a semitrailer wasn’t still blocking the front gate.

December 5, 2018 (Wednesday)

Yoyogi-Hachiman, Office

Three days had passed since the commotion surrounding Otherworldly

Language Comprehension had ended.

After discovering the information on parties, Naruse had been translating a frightening amount. Her interest in uncovering new truths must have been a great motivation. In any case, she didn't just stay at our office from morning until evening. Because Saiga had allowed Naruse to work at her own discretion, she stayed cooped up here from one morning until the next, translating the whole time.

As its name implied, Otherworldly Language Comprehension gave one the ability to understand the dungeon's unique script. Even so, this wasn't an otherworldly *translation* skill. The user still had to convey nonexistent and foreign cultural concepts in their own language, as well as gamelike rules and concepts. Doing this required a certain amount of knowledge and training.

Naruse was translating all the currently published inscriptions with incredible enthusiasm. After all, she already had sufficient knowledge of the dungeons. And since there were very few concepts that she didn't understand, her translation speed was something to behold.

At one point, I'd asked her, "Won't you get in trouble for not going into the JDA?"

"I earned them forty billion yen the other day," she'd answered. "I could slack off for ten years, and no one would get on my case!"

Yeah, not sure if that's totally reasonable.

"Hey, Miyoshi," I said. "I think you might be corrupting Naruse."

"What are you talking about, Kei? She's acting more like you, not me."

"Huh?"

"Take a good look at her," Miyoshi prompted. "Once she begins working on something, morning and night start blending together. 'Since it's getting so late, I'll finish this by morning,' she starts to say. Before long, she can't come into work on a regular schedule, and she ends up living in the office. Does that vicious cycle remind you of a certain someone?"

"Hold up," I protested. "That's not what I was talking about."

I'd been talking about Naruse's claim that she could slack off for a decade without any trouble. Still, I kept my mouth shut and averted my eyes, as Miyoshi would definitely win that argument.

In a mere two days, the Japanese-style room on the first floor—which was around thirty square feet—had become Naruse's work and nap room. Perhaps feeling sorry for Naruse, Miyoshi had brought in a relatively nice sofa bed.

"We might have heating, but she still can't sleep on the floor," Miyoshi had said.

We'd also discussed privacy in regard to Naruse always being here.

"Everything important is password-protected," Miyoshi had said with a laugh. "And since I don't leave anything valuable out in the open, we should be fine even with a spy in the office."

She had saved everything truly important on a laptop, placing it in Storage along with our paper files. Even if you haphazardly chucked your belongings into Storage, you could view the items as a list when withdrawing them. How convenient could things get?

Whenever Naruse finished a translation, Miyoshi posted it to our new website. That being said, no font existed for the inscriptions. Thus, we posted actual photographs of the inscriptions when possible, also providing their IDs and translations.

Though we only had Japanese translations for now, I considered providing English versions before their publication in December. Just like I had told Monica recently, we planned for the site to go live on Christmas Day. Thanksgiving might have been a flop, but if the dungeons could appropriate religious events, then so could we.

As the translations progressed, the inscriptions discovered thus far seemed to be fragments from two different texts.

First was *The Book of Wanderers*, which was essentially an instruction manual for the dungeons. In fragments, it conveyed the unique characteristics and surprising qualities of the dungeons, as well as explaining its "game system."

Despite having similar contents, some inscriptions differed subtly from one

another. Regardless, Naruse translated these passages without trying to force consistency. From here on out, it would be the job of researchers to reconcile these discrepancies.

As *The Book of Wanderers* had stated, “The dungeon inscriptions are mere copies of this text.” And apparently, those copies could have slight discrepancies.

I’ve gotta say, whoever created these inscriptions is getting a bit too elaborate with their setting.

The inscriptions that didn’t belong to *The Book of Wanderers* had been engraved with some sort of strange history.

“Don’t these remind you of the flavor text we saw through Appraisal?” Miyoshi asked.

She was attempting to order these historical fragments in a meaningful way, but ultimately, this ended in failure.

“They do,” I replied. “Maybe these inscriptions are a sort of self-introduction to the world beyond the dungeons.”

“If that world wants to introduce itself, maybe it should do the normal thing and give us an entire book,” Miyoshi complained. “There’s no need to be so roundabout.”

“But gradually collecting the inscriptions will draw the interest of researchers and explorers for a longer period of time.”

“That may be true, but... Well, thinking about this too much is probably a waste of time. For now, I’ll just order these by date of discovery and type of inscription.”

As if to switch her train of thought, Miyoshi stood up from her chair and stretched.

“Taking a break?” I asked.

“Yep,” she answered.

“Oh, I just remembered. A few days ago, the news was running a story on the semitrailer accident.”

Though paramedics had tried to rescue the truck driver, he'd already died of a heart attack. In the end, the authorities had ruled his sudden death at the wheel as the cause of the accident.

Miyoshi sighed. "Our world seems chock-full of malice and conspiracy, doesn't it?"

"And I just want to live a peaceful, carefree life."

"Me too..."

Naruse interrupted our conversation from behind. "My deepest apologies to everyone who wants to live a peaceful, carefree life, but... I don't think that'll be possible."

She then handed me the translation of RU22-0012 in a reserved manner.

Inscription IDs followed this pattern: the country that discovered the inscription + area ID + order of discovery. In other words, Russia had been credited with the discovery of this inscription, and it had been the twelfth one found in Area 22. Incidentally, Area 22 was the location of Moscow.

The contents of this inscription would shock explorers across the world. And in all likelihood, Russia had deliberately concealed it.

If this information had been published, the entire roster of top-ranked explorers wouldn't have gathered in Yoyogi. And in fact, the second-ranked explorer—a Russian named Dimitri—hadn't visited Japan.

"Infinite mineral resources are available from the twentieth to seventy-ninth levels of all dungeons," I read aloud. "And from there on out..."

This inscription didn't complete the second sentence. Regardless, the first part was a huge revelation by itself.

"Even if this is true, hauling out a large quantity of minerals would be difficult as of right now," I said. "In reality, that will limit the production amount."

"But if the dungeons produce rare or precious metals, this could even have an effect on world trends," Miyoshi pointed out.

"That's true," I agreed. "These 'mineral resources' might even include gemstones."

“Still, what do you think is on the eightieth level and beyond?” Naruse asked. “This particular inscription doesn’t say. Talk about a nasty place to cut off.”

“It must be mithril or orichalcum,” Miyoshi responded.

Despite her teasing manner, I found this highly probable. The dungeons were luring humanity ever deeper into their depths. As such, there would be rewards to maintain our exploratory motivation even beyond the seventy-ninth level.

“According to this inscription, the mineral produced on each floor will differ according to the dungeon,” Naruse said. “But the fiftieth level is the same for all dungeons... And it’s gold.”

Whoa. The fiftieth level of all dungeons across the world will produce an inexhaustible supply of gold?

“When people find out about this, the gold market will probably crash,” I said.

“Remember what you just said, Kei?” Miyoshi asked. “Hauling out several tons of mass from the dungeons won’t be easy.”

Currently, the world produced around three thousand tons of gold a year. Hauling out that amount from the fiftieth level of a dungeon would certainly be difficult. And if you screwed up, the production cost could outstrip the profits.

Naruse continued scrolling down the translation, whose latter half explained the mining method.

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy to obtain,” she said. “First, you have to defeat an earth elemental monster and acquire the Mining skill. Once you have this skill, monsters on the twentieth level and below will drop mineral resources.”

Apparently, each floor dropped a fixed type of mineral with the species of monster being irrelevant.

“Mining is currently an unregistered skill,” Naruse added.

“Earth elemental monsters, huh?” I repeated. “Based on how Mining works, I bet you can find the drop monster by the twentieth floor.”

Naruse nodded. “In Yoyogi, the great desmana on the thirteenth level immediately comes to mind.”

“Yeah, that one does seem like an earth elemental.”

It was a mole, after all.

“Still, I would prefer something straightforward like gnomes, genomos, or gnomids,” I said. “Oh, and maybe dwarves too.”

“Huh?” Miyoshi asked. “There are genomos in Yoyogi Dungeon.”

“Seriously?” I replied.

“Yeah. I’m trying to remember which floor they’re on...”

“The eighteenth,” Naruse answered helpfully. “Most of this level is a steep, rugged mountain range. Genomos live in the caverns, but the foothills stretch out as far as the eye can see. On top of that, the underground caverns are quite troublesome. When you combine these two things, explorers tend to give the mountain range a wide berth.”

“Sounds like bingo to me,” I said.

“Are we going there?” Miyoshi asked, her eyes sparkling.

Infinite mineral resources. A man could certainly dream. Even so...

“So without Mining, you can’t acquire the minerals?” I asked. “That’s pretty restrictive, don’t you think?”

“About that...” Naruse trailed off, scrolling farther down the inscription.

Upon seeing the translation, I furrowed my brow. “Forty-nine unique skill holders?”

Based on this text, if more than forty-nine people in possession of Mining occupied a certain floor, then everyone could acquire the predetermined mineral as a drop.

“What do you think, Miyoshi?” I asked.

“Forty-nine is a lucky number,” she responded immediately.

If I had to guess, forty-nine would be the thirteenth lucky number.

“What?” Naruse asked with a dubious expression.

“The dungeons send messages through numbers,” Miyoshi said. “And this

time, the message is ‘good fortune’.”

True—this could be good fortune for countries lacking in natural resources. Still...

“A lucky number is a natural number in a set that’s generated by a certain ‘sieve’,” Miyoshi continued her explanation. “This particular sieve is sometimes called ‘the sieve of Josephus Flavius’ in reference to the Josephus problem. According to that story, a group of soldiers found themselves in an unlucky place and died.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Naruse asked, completely baffled.

“When Josephus and his men were trapped in a cave by Roman soldiers, they chose suicide over capture, standing in a circle and drawing lots to determine their order of death. Whatever counting-out game they played probably resembled this lucky number sieve. Basically, anyone who survived a round of that game fell on a lucky number. And forty-nine is the thirteenth lucky number.”

“You’re definitely overthinking things,” Naruse said, her expression difficult to read.

Even so, the dungeons had used Earth’s culture as a metaphor in the past. If they were doing so again, we couldn’t ignore this.

“Either way, acquiring Mining will be relatively dangerous,” Naruse commented.

Miyoshi nodded. “But in the end, we’ll have to do that ourselves.”

“Yep,” I agreed. “That’s just the way the cookie crumbles.”

Why did the cookie have to crumble that way, exactly? Perhaps because I kept getting involved in things better left alone. And those cookies were fragile.

“Hold on a second,” Naruse cut in. “Mining aside, there’s one more thing I need to show you.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

Once again, Naruse handed me a file apologetically. This one read “BF26-0003.”

“What country is BF?” I asked.

“Burkina Faso,” Naruse replied.

“Sounds like the name of a dinosaur,” Miyoshi said with a laugh.

Burkina Faso was a country in West Africa whose northern territory occupied the Sahel—an arid region on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. There had been a food crisis in this area for several years due to an ongoing drought. Of the countries in this vicinity, Burkina Faso and Japan had a relatively close relationship, as we’d been expanding aid there.

Gorom-Gorom was the largest city in Burkina Faso’s northern Oudalan Prefecture. About thirty kilometers northeast of this city, one could find the large Markoeye Pond. Markoeye Dungeon—where this inscription had been discovered—stood on the southern end of this pond.

“It’s surprising that anyone found a dungeon there,” I said.

“Apparently, a member of BirdLife International was the first person to find it,” Naruse replied.

“What’s that?”

Miyoshi ran a quick search on BirdLife International. As one of the world’s largest international NGOs, it was dedicated to the conservation of birds. Since the year 2000, various environmental protection programs had been adopted around Markoeye, as it was a treasure trove for local birds.

And this inscription was even more shocking than RU22-0012.

“Food?!” I cried out.

“Much like the mineral resources, food can be acquired from the lower levels of the dungeons,” Naruse said. “Specifically, on levels two through twenty. If we’re to believe this inscription, anyway.”

If this wasn’t a mistake of the inscriptions, solving the Sahel’s food crisis might be possible. Perhaps we could even find a solution to the world’s overpopulation problems, as well as poverty in lands not suited for agriculture.

“For humanity as a whole, this will cause a much bigger stir than mineral production,” I noted.

Naruse nodded. “But the conditions pose a problem.”

“Do we need another skill orb called Harvest?” Miyoshi jokingly asked.

But this time, the conditions—defined further into the translation—were different.

“The total number of explorers?” I asked.

That would be the trigger for initiating food drops.

Naruse nodded again. “Apparently, when the number of explorers exceeds five hundred million, monsters will begin dropping food.”

The dungeons had appeared three years ago, and in that time, we’d reached nearly one hundred million explorers. At a glance, five hundred million seemed like a distant prospect.

A thought crossed my mind. “Once this information goes public, some countries might force their citizens to become explorers as a national undertaking. Especially those worried about future food distribution due to population explosion.”

China would be first on this list, as securing food was a top priority for their leadership. I could easily imagine them forcing their citizens to register as explorers.

“Over five hundred million people are capable of becoming explorers in Asia and Africa alone,” I continued. “We could reach that number in the blink of an eye.”

“But Kei,” Miyoshi said. “That might be okay for starving regions, but for areas with enough food, it’ll disrupt production and distribution.”

On modern day Earth, the uneven production of food was an obvious reason for the existence of starving regions. However, if you considered factors like price, distribution, and so forth, this was an inevitable outcome.

“Since selling the food won’t net much of a profit, most of those starving regions will consume it themselves,” I pointed out. “And in countries with enough food, there won’t be any merit to actively hunt for it, right?”

Miyoshi shook her head. “Didn’t we already talk about how dungeon-

produced foods might increase one's abilities?"

Oh, right. The hellhound tongues. I remember that.

In other words, dungeon-produced foods could be the key ingredient to creating Superman.

"If dungeon-produced crops truly increase one's abilities, even non-starving regions will begin hunting for the food in droves," Miyoshi said. "After all, you can obtain it on the second level."

"But in that case, won't dungeon-produced foods become more expensive?" I asked. "That would create an isolated market from preexisting foods."

Of course, this would depend on the production amount, but compared to the size of the world, there were very few dungeons. I couldn't imagine the dungeons producing enough food to replace the majority of what humanity consumed.

Preexisting foods wouldn't stop selling and decrease in price. Instead, dungeon-produced crops would become high-priced goods and exist in a different market than our current food. Depending on the price, starving regions might start exporting their dungeon-produced foods. Hopefully, those supplies would be used to barter for regular food.

Miyoshi sighed. "It looks like the world is going to change drastically starting next year."

"You could probably make a fortune by selling a bunch of futures right now," I said.

Despite my joking tone, this information would have a huge impact, regardless of the reality of the situation. The price of grain futures would fall, at least temporarily. But rationally, we couldn't suddenly raise food production enough to have a major influence on the world. In the beginning, this would be no more significant than explorers cultivating home gardens to feed their families.

"I'll pass," Miyoshi said. "If someone investigates my trade history, I'll earn the entire world's ire."

True enough. If we sold futures under Miyoshi's name, and the market value changed due to leaks associated with D-Powers, she would definitely receive criticism. Even if we weren't *technically* insiders.

"We need to go public with this at once," Naruse said. "But even if we did, no one would believe us."

I understood how she felt, but currently, going public with the inscriptions would be a delicate issue. The trust we earned in the beginning would be important.

"Unfortunately, they wouldn't," Miyoshi agreed. "Still, by releasing the party information, we can have the entire world run follow-up tests. Without the trust we earn from that, everyone will ignore the other translations."

Naruse nodded in resignation.

As I looked over these extremely enlightening inscriptions, I couldn't help but crack a joke. "Y'know, before long, we'll probably find an inscription that reads, 'If you descend through a crater at the peak of Snæfellsjökull, you'll arrive at the center of the Earth'." [\(20\)](#)

"There's actually a dungeon in Area 28 around Snæfellsjökull," Miyoshi replied. "And it's open for sightseeing, if I recall correctly."

"I can go on a true journey to the center of the Earth?!" I shouted reflexively.

Without a doubt, the minerals produced in that dungeon would be diamonds or crystals.

Epilogue

“Phew.”

After translating an inscription from America, Monica stopped to take a break.

She wasn't in New York, where the US Dungeon Association was located. Neither was she in the Department of the Interior's headquarters, where the United States Dungeon Department was located. No, she was in one corner of a building managed by the Dungeon Strike Force, which was relatively close to the White House. Her living space and laboratory were adjacent to each other. From a positive perspective, she could immerse herself in work. From a negative perspective, she felt like the walls were closing in around her.

Dungeon research extended across multiple fields, and she found the subject matter fascinating. Also, humanity needed to gather as much information as possible in preparation for their first contact with the society beyond the dungeons. Thus, Monica had been happy for her position, which had allowed her to use a valuable skill orb.

Even though only a few days had passed since she'd used the skill orb, the opposing positions of politics and science were gradually creating conflict.

Monica recalled the man she'd met in Japan.

“If the space between research and politics grows stifling, you don't have to do what you're told,” he'd said. “And if you're not explicitly forbidden from doing something, feel free to do it.”

“He was a rather strange man, wasn't he?” Monica muttered to herself.

He'd been different from anyone else Monica had ever known. Despite his aloof demeanor, his sentiment had gotten across to her. “What's most important is your own will.” Somehow or another, his words had convinced her of that.

“Yes, it makes a certain kind of sense,” Monica continued muttering to

herself.

Yoshimura had also said, “By the time you reach adulthood, you’ll be much freer than you are now.” And because he of all people had made this statement, she vaguely believed him.

Monica took out a small piece of paper from her pocket, opening it gently.

When was the last time I felt this excited for Christmas? Kindergarten?

Wearing a childlike smile, she folded and unfolded the piece of paper—which contained the URL that Yoshimura had given her—countless times.

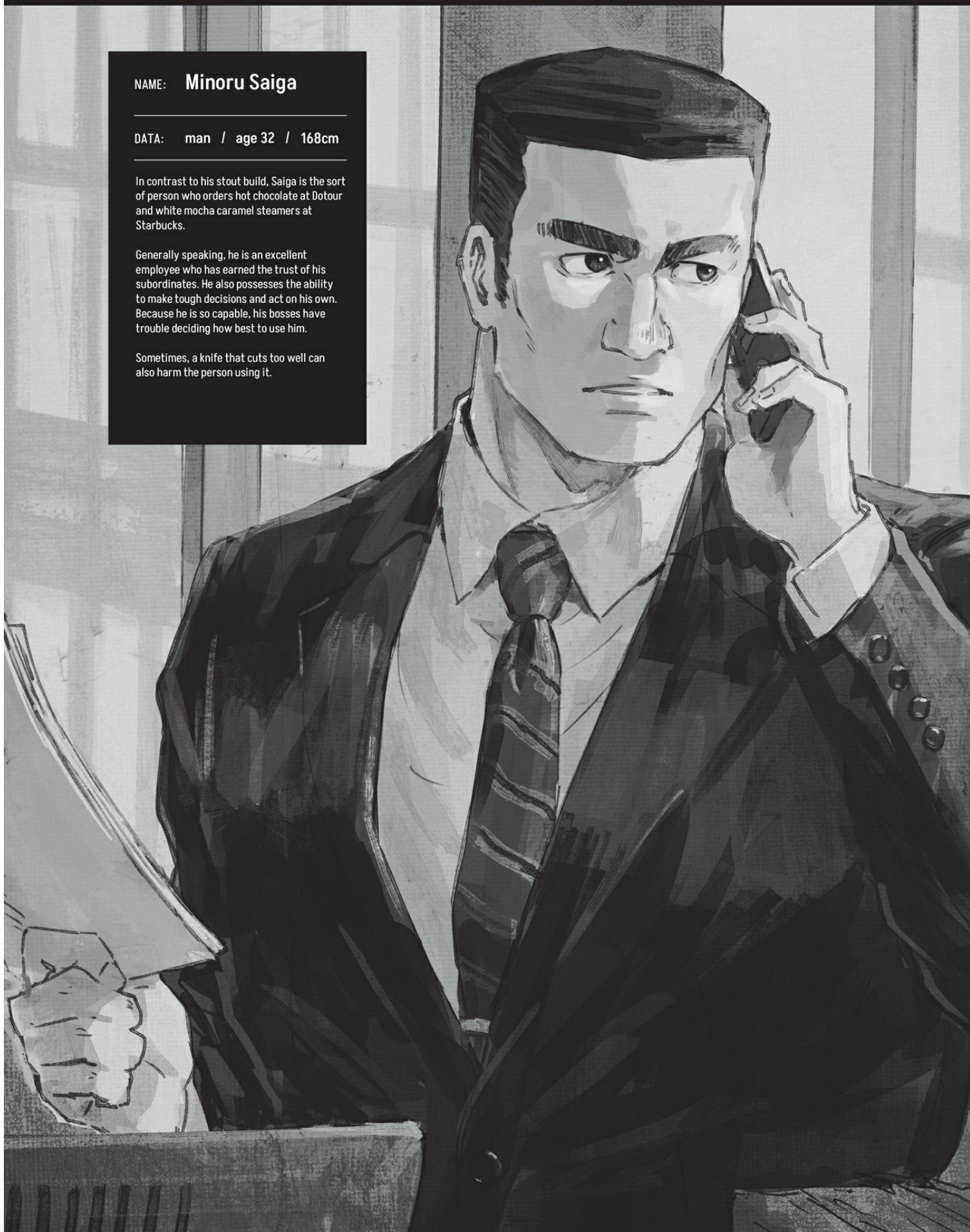
NAME: **Minoru Saiga**

DATA: man / age 32 / 168cm

In contrast to his stout build, Saiga is the sort of person who orders hot chocolate at Dotour and white mocha caramel steamers at Starbucks.

Generally speaking, he is an excellent employee who has earned the trust of his subordinates. He also possesses the ability to make tough decisions and act on his own. Because he is so capable, his bosses have trouble deciding how best to use him.

Sometimes, a knife that cuts too well can also harm the person using it.





NAME: **Ryoko Saito**

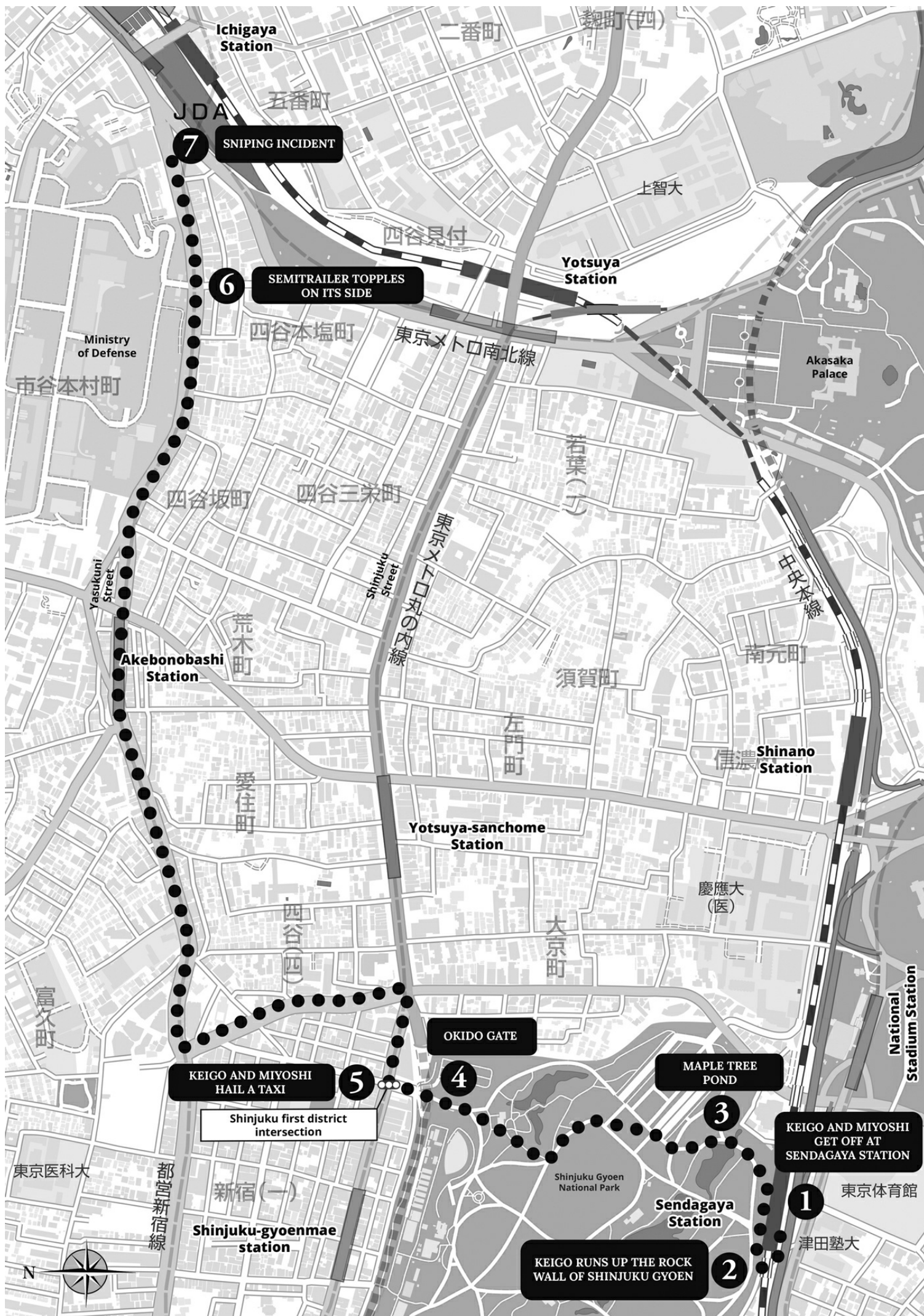
DATA: **woman / age 21 / 164cm**

Ryoko's selling point is that no one ever dislikes her, despite her relatively blunt manner of speaking. As an actress in the making, she's a go-getter when it comes to landing roles, barreling forward like a tank in the face of both flattery and criticism.

Similar to a cat, Ryoko cozies up to those she comes into contact with. The average person could never hope to emulate her splendid technique.

By weaponizing her cuteness, she is a master at garnering affection from others. Yet sometimes, another side of her—one overflowing with a sense of responsibility—becomes visible. While strong, she also has a caring disposition.

Some people might appear light and frivolous, but until you actually try picking them up, you'll never know their true weight.



Afterword

At the time of writing this, the world is still abuzz with conversation about the coronavirus. How is everyone faring?

Kono here. By the time this book comes out, I hope that things will have calmed down somewhat.

The story of this volume is centered around the acquisition of Otherworldly Language Comprehension. Occasionally, inscriptions with unreadable characters are found within the dungeons. Of course, these inscriptions are the subject of research, but their characters originate from a culture completely different from any on Earth. Since there isn't any fundamental starting point in understanding these characters, deciphering them is progressing slowly.

Yet one day, a certain skill orb is discovered inside a dungeon in a secluded area of Russia. This skill orb grants its user the ability to understand these inscriptions.

Based on their translations, there are two categories of inscriptions: those resembling incomprehensible fables and those explaining the rules of the "dungeon system."

This report causes an uproar in various countries across the world.

Though the inscriptions contain sensational information, no one knows for certain if their contents are true. Knowledge of the "rules" will no doubt provide a huge advantage in utilizing the dungeons. However, someone could deliberately mistranslate the inscriptions to monopolize these rules and mislead the world. As a result, other countries are desperate to find the same skill orb and verify the inscriptions for themselves.

If only one country is able to publish translations, this could lead to the formation of vassal states based on information. From a national security standpoint, this is a very serious issue.

While leaders across the world frantically compel their explorers to retrieve

this orb, our main characters—the D-Powers duo—find it all too easily.

Previously, Keigo made detailed predictions about the orb's drop monster. He even formed a plan before leaving on their dungeon diving expedition. Despite all this, he coincidentally finds Otherworldly Language Comprehension midway through their exploration. What's more, he obtains two copies of the orb at the same time. Could this be a result of his 100 LUC?

Naturally, D-Powers finding this orb leads to mass pandemonium. The JDA won't buy it from them. The Japanese government doesn't learn of the situation until after the orb is put up for auction. America reacts overzealously, and multiple organizations bid on the orb. Finally, Russia dispatches an extralegal organization in an attempt to sabotage the transaction.

This is all the result of numerous people with their own ideas and positions doing what they believe to be best. However, when the world falls into disorder, this is often the cause.

In a certain sense, *D-Genesis* mocks exploitative workplaces. That being said, there are sometimes jobs that appear exploitative on the surface but actually aren't. Programming is one example of this, especially in research, systems, and game development.

Whenever possible, programmers want to remain focused until they keel over and die. While in this state, they'll continue thinking about code regardless of hunger or fatigue. In fact, they don't even *feel* hunger or fatigue when deeply focused. Sounds like one hell of a drug, right? (LOL.)

When a programmer loses concentration, they have to retrace their logic from the beginning and reassess the issue. Consequently, programmers will continue thinking until they've reached a good stopping point. If a programmer puts something off until tomorrow because their work shift has ended, they'll end up repeating the same tasks day in and day out.

And most of the time, programmers will immediately forget the contents of a completed task.

(Of course, they'll immediately remember those contents if they look over their work.)

In the past, someone used the update times on GitHub to check the work times of famous programmers. For the most part, those who seemed to lead well-regulated lives were those with families. What was the proof of this, you ask? One year, these peoples' insane work hours would suddenly become well-regulated, almost as if they had started families.

I myself have slept on a cardboard bed under my desk, but I never thought of this as exploitative. When it comes to work that requires being in the office, business hours and pointless meetings are the greatest enemies. Still, you can't say that to clients (*LOL*).

Except for important meetings and needing to see certain people, programmers want to ignore business hours and receive evaluation based on the results of their work.

According to some people, both coming into and leaving the office are also a waste of time. If they go home, they don't come back into the office. And if they come into the office, they don't go home. That's a little too uninhibited, don't you think?

Perhaps the same is true for people who write fiction. Once you get into the swing of things, you want to write forever without interruption. Everyone probably feels the same way. Even I—as a weekend novelist—have those thoughts. And if you thought of writing time as business hours, this could be considered an extremely demanding job. But at least you can still sleep in your own bed.

But anyway, I'm about to hit my word limit.

Volume 2 is being published today thanks to the hard work of my editors. But it's especially thanks to everyone who bought Volume 1. Thank you so much. I'll keep working hard so that you can continue buying future volumes.

And to the person looking at this afterword in the bookstore: forgive me for singing my own praises, but I'm confident that you will enjoy this book. After all, I found the story pretty interesting when looking over it myself. Skip on down to the register at your earliest convenience!

Similar to Volume 1, various company names and trademarks appeared in this book. All of them are entirely works of fiction.

I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Annotations

1. [PEFC/Polymer Electrolyte Fuel Cell](#): These fuel cells are compact, lightweight, highly efficient, and have a high power density. Because of this, they tend to be expensive.
2. [DMFC/Direct Methanol Fuel Cell](#): Compared to PEFCs, these are relatively inexpensive. They can also be more compact and lightweight. However, this results in slightly inferior performance.
3. ["...much like Cristopher Walken in a certain movie." / The Dead Zone](#): A film based on the novel by Stephen King. After gaining the ability to see the future, the main character witnesses a presidential candidate fire a nuclear missile should he win the election. To prevent this from occurring, the main character attempts to assassinate the presidential candidate.
4. ["Clever players will always consider..."](#): In the 1987 game *Wizardry IV: The Return of Werdna*, this line appears when a player has no room in their inventory to pick up an important item. On these occasions, the game doesn't allow the player to discard an item and exchange it for another. Nope, that would be too easy.
5. [Rawhide](#): A hit American drama from 1959. *Rawhide* is especially famous for its theme song's catchy hook of "Rollin', rollin', rollin'." Before his breakout success, Clint Eastwood was a regular actor on the show. In *The Blues Brothers* film, there is a famous scene in which the main characters are booed by the crowd at a country music venue. Having no other choice, they perform the *Rawhide* theme song, winning over the crowd. (*The Blues Brothers* is a wonderful movie. Even if you don't understand English, just hearing Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles sing puts the viewer in a great mood.)
6. ["The bank examiner for whom this bridge was named..." / The Arland Williams Jr. Memorial Bridge](#): In 1987, Air Florida Flight 90 crashed in the Potomac River. Arland D. Williams allowed two women to be rescued in his

stead, which resulted in his drowning. For this action, the bridge was renamed in his honor. Prior to Williams's death, the bridge was named Rochambeau.

7. ["Is the protagonist of Golgo 13 going to show up and blast me with his ArmaLite M-16?"](#): Written by Takao Saito, *Golgo 13* is famous for being the oldest manga still in publication. The protagonist—who wields an ArmaLite M-16—hardly ever speaks.
8. [Akira Inugami](#): The protagonist of *Wolf Guy*, a manga by Kazumasa Hirai.
9. ["And whatever walked there, walked alone."](#): From *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson. This is the last sentence of the opening paragraph. *Hill House* is a seminal work in the haunted house subgenre of horror. Stephen King even quoted this line at the beginning of *Salem's Lot*. *Hill House* has received three adaptations: two movies and one limited series. The second film is famous for having received five Golden Raspberry nominations, but even so, it was a financial success.
10. ["The evil spirit of Emeric Belasco is definitely residing within an inner chapel."](#): A reference to *Hell House* by Richard Matheson. Although the movie is probably more famous than the book, the script was written by the original author. It's also a landmark achievement in haunted house films. In the present day, a group of people suffer terrible fates due to the deceased Emeric's obsessions and psychological complexes. For some reason, the Japanese subtitles refer to him as "Emerihi."
11. ["Nevermore!" the bird squawked loudly.](#): A reference to "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe. This is so famous that I can't even comment on it. Nevermore.
12. ["...no extra-dimensional creature appeared to swallow us up."](#): A reference to *Alone in the Dark*, a survival horror game released for PC in 1992. It was produced by Infogram. Specifically, this is in reference to the first game in the series. If you try to escape the mansion through the entrance without solving the mysteries, a bizarre entity will eat you as soon as you open the door. The fan base has decided that this creature is Azathoth.

13. [Memory](#): Muninn is a raven appearing in Norse mythology. As a pair, he and Huginn serve Odin. Huginn means “mind,” and Muninn means “memory.”
14. [Red River](#): A manga by Chie Shinohara. In Japanese, the title is *Sora wa Akai Kawa no Hotori*, which translates to “The Sky is a Red Riverbank.” However, Sora—meaning sky—is written with the kanji for Heaven, which is usually read as “ten.” Readers of the individual volumes will have a hard time picking up on this, as the cover lacks any romaji or furigana. However, if you look at the Flower Comics advertisements at the end of each volume, which people tend to skip over, you’ll finally learn the actual name of the manga. *Red River* is second only to *Glass Mask* among binge-worthy shoujo manga.
15. [“...based on recent examples involving Chinese megacorporations...”](#): In *D-Genesis*, I attempt to depict the events of 2018—from small to large—as faithfully as possible. But in reality, Meng Wanzhou wasn’t arrested until December first.
16. [For Whom the Bell Tolls](#): A novel by Ernest Hemingway.
17. [Two hundred yen](#): The previous admission fee for Shinjuku Gyoen National Park. In March of 2019, the price was raised to five hundred yen, presumably for the Olympics. That’s more than double the original fee! While students can visit the park for half price, anyone in middle school or below can get in for free. Also, an annual pass is two thousand yen. That’s the price of four visits. Shinjuku Gyoen is an incredibly wonderful park. If you live in the area, please visit for yourself.
18. [MOA](#): Minute of Angle. A unit of measurement describing the accuracy of a gun. At one MOA, all bullets fired at one hundred yards will strike within one inch of each other.
19. [“...as her last name implied.”](#): The etymology of the last name “Clark” is “cleric.” A cleric is a clergyman or woman.
20. [“If you descend through a crater at the peak of Snæfellsjökull, you’ll arrive at the center of the Earth.”](#): From *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne. The manga adaptation illustrated by Norihiko Kurazono is

interesting as well.



Aethlem

Personality: Serious.

Keigo Yoshimura

A former wage slave who quit his salaried job. "The king of exploited employees" according to Miyoshi.

Azusa Miyoshi

Yoshimura's former junior at work. Currently, his capable representative.

Drudwyn

Personality: Cool and collected.

Cavall

Personality: The most expressive of the four hellhounds. He thinks of himself as the original servant.

Glessic

Personality: Easygoing.



Yoyogi Dungeon: Tenth Level

Undead Floor



D GENESIS

WRITTEN BY
KONO Tsuranori
ILLUSTRATED BY
ttl

Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared





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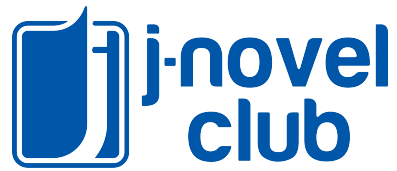
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D-Genesis: Three Years after the Dungeons Appeared Volume 2

by KONO Tsuranori

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D GENESIS DUNGEON GA DEKITE 3 NEN Vol.2

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